The Lake at Midnight by BigBadLittleRed

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Summary:

Jonathan would do this for his mother's sake, for her and his brother to stop worrying about him so much. Maybe if he spent some time at his grandmother's house they'd forget about all the problems he had, they'd think everything was okay again even though it hadn't really been for a long time.

What he didn't plan on was meeting someone that didn't care that he was a bit of an odd duck, a summer at his grandmother's house quickly turning into a secret romance. Jonathan hadn't been able to achieve happiness for years, but this was the closest he'd gotten to it in quite a while.

1. A Summer at Nana's

Author's Note:

> (I've been planning this one for a bit, and I'm still writing the sequel to Lost Cause, I promise! But I've officially graduated high school, so why not spend the summer writing some sweet and angsty Stonathan?)

The rush of the scenery outside was steadily gaining in trees and lessening in buildings, he closes his eyes and tries to drown it all out under the sound of The Cure. They had been driving for four hours now, all the way to a house just outside of a small town in the middle of nowhere. Of course, his own hometown was rather in the middle of nowhere, but at least he had his room and his stuff and Pepper's Pizzeria. There was a heavy mood in his heart, he hated fighting with his mother and prior to this car ride had been the worst one yet.

Jonathan felt like his entire life was a paper ball in a washing machine, slowly being torn to wet shreds without mercy. He couldn't understand his own emotions, hadn't been able to for a while now. A lot of people called him a freak, and maybe that was true, because he never really did feel normal. Part of him blamed his father, whose shitty personality must have twisted his small mind as a child and fucked him up as he got older. His mother said it was just hormones and he was growing up, but he felt jagged and lonely and he just wanted to die.

"If you don't want me around so much then why don't I just kill myself?!"

His earlier words had been a bit dramatic, but to his mother they had been catastrophic. She was worried about him, he knew that, and he

didn't want her to worry but at the same time he appreciated it. It had only been a month since Will had come home from the woods and found Jonathan crying in the shed like a coward. He had been doing that a lot lately, and it was probably not the healthiest thing in the world but it was what got him through the day. Will had told their mother that night, and Jonathan had gotten the most serious talk of his life since his parents had gotten divorced.

Joyce had asked him what was wrong, if kids were still picking on him, if he ever felt like hurting himself. The conversation was painful and he had tears in his eyes through the whole thing, he didn't like talking about things like that, they made him uncomfortable. His feelings were hard to discuss, hard to admit, and when Joyce had told him 'it's okay for boys to cry' he'd only gotten angry and told her to get out. She didn't get it, Will didn't get it, nobody got it. Hell, even Jonathan didn't understand it.

He was just emotionally damaged, he felt perpetually hopeless and sad and he had been for a while. He wasn't going to kill himself, even if he felt like it sometimes; he wouldn't want to do that to Will or his mother. He recognized that he mattered in their eyes, even if he didn't mean a thing to most people. Everything in his head felt messed up, and he was planning on getting a job this summer and spending the rest of his free time in his room.

But then his mom came into his room a week before and explained that she thought it was best for him to go to his grandmother's house for the summer when Will went off to summer camp. Jonathan had no idea what exactly she thought would happen sending him away, as if it might fix the fact that he's a weirdo or that he's depressed (He hated that word, it didn't fit right with the rest of his thoughts). All it would do was stick him a few hours away from home in an old creaky house all alone with only his grandmother as company. Of course he rarely had company at all, but spending an entire summer in Iowa meant not being able to see Will at all, who

was pretty much his only friend in the world.

Joyce had told him he would make friends, that there were a lot of kids in the town nearby but she should know by now that kids don't like him. From the beginning, he was a problem; he stared too much, he was too quiet, he was too nervous. The kids his age were too damn picky, a bunch of pretentious brats that he didn't want to be around anymore. He's sure that the teenagers from Riverton, Iowa are no different from those in Hawkins, Indiana.

He had spent a couple of days at a time out at his grandmother's property before with his mother and brother over the years, it wasn't a bad place. His grandmother was a sweet old woman and Jonathan loved her very much, but he didn't want to spend his summer in a foreign place. He would be bored and uncomfortable, honestly despite acknowledging how over dramatic he was being earlier, being dead sounded pretty good right now.

Jonathan had said his goodbye to Will, who hadn't stopped looking at him funny since he found him crying. He hugged Jonathan extra tight and made him promise to try and make friends at their grandmother's house, he had no choice but to agree. His little brother wasn't an idiot, he was the smartest little boy Jonathan had ever met (four being the total of little boys he'd met in the past few years, but that was irrelevant). He was worried just like their mother, why did they have to worry so much? Why couldn't Jonathan just be left to mope in private?

He feels the distinct urge to cry stuck deep in his chest, but he simply takes in a deep breath and staves it off. Breaking down in the car wouldn't make Joyce take him home, it'd land him in Pen Hurst Mental Hospital.

Jonathan slips his headphones off of his ears and lets them rest on his shoulders, opening his eyes and sitting up a little to look over at his mother. The woman had her eyes focused on the road and the crease on her forehead told him that she was in deep thought at the moment.

"Mom?" He says quietly, watching the crinkle of her skin disappear and leave only a faint line behind in its place.

"Yes, sweetheart?" She murmurs in reply.

"I'm sorry," He admits, and Joyce takes one of her hands off of the wheel to grab her son's gently. She squeezes his fingers a little and brings it up to her face to kiss his knuckles, settling their joined hands on the arm rest.

"It's all right, honey." She rubs at the back of his hand with her thumb, and he turns his eyes out to the road ahead. There's nothing but trees and a single road with not a car in sight. "I'm just worried about you, you know that, right?" She says gently, he nods his head and bites the inside of his cheek. "I think this will be good for you, grandma's house is so beautiful. You can take lots of good pictures to show Will and me when you get back." Joyce turns her eyes away from the road for a moment to smile brightly at him.

"Yeah, I guess." He agrees almost inaudibly, carefully pulling his hand from his mother's and crossing his arms over his chest as he sinks low in his seat. His seatbelt touches his chin and he's most definitely pouting but he'd never admit that, his mother reaches over and rubs his shoulder before returning her hands to the

wheel.

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It had been almost a year since he'd last seen his grandmother's house but he always can tell they're close when they turn off of a main empty highway at an old beat up sign that has 'Riverton' written across it in big black letters and an arrow pointing down the old road. They drive past a few people as they get further into town, some teenagers and younger kids, a few adults.

"See, Jonathan? Lots of kids for you to be friends with." Joyce tells him optimistically as they pass a few teens laughing and cutting up on the side of the road.

"More like lots of kids to kick my ass." He huffs under his breath, earning a soft smack of his shoulder before he drops his head against his window.

"If you'd just be a little more optimistic, positive…" Joyce shakes her head with a soft sigh.

"I'm positive this is a bad idea." Jonathan offers in a deadpan tone, Joyce gives him a look and he quiets down.

They continue to drive for a few minutes, reaching the far side of the town and down an old dirt road out on a field of tall grass. He can spot the house immediately, tall and old and the only thing

smack dab in the middle of the field other than a few trees. Jonathan glances behind them in the rearview mirror, watching the dirt fly in their wake as they pass.

They pull up just behind his grandmother's little old car, Jonathan watches the front porch for a moment. Sure enough, the woman comes out from the screen door and approaches the edge of the porch to wave at them happily. Jonathan climbs from the car, slipping one of his bags over his shoulder as he hurries across the yard to climb the steps. His grandmother spreads her arms and he quickly wraps his arms around the little old woman. Okay, so he missed her, big deal…

"Oh angel, how have you been?" She groans as she hugs him back tightly, she smells like old soap and a dash of hairspray. He was finally getting taller than her, although he was pretty small for his age, and would most likely not grow much more.

"I'm okay, nana." He promises, and as he leans back he realizes it's a lie. He couldn't quite tell how long it had been since he was okay, when a simple greeting had become a blatant lie. Jonathan shakes off the unease in his chest and smiles at his grandmother, reveling in how happy he was to see her.

She hadn't changed much in a year, her medium length gray hair tied back in a ponytail and her thick glasses sloping down on the bridge of her nose. She was dressed in a pretty blue blouse with beige Capri pants and a pair of navy blue moccasins. Joyce often worried about her on her own since grandpa had died, but the woman was bright and lively and quite spry for a seventy year old woman.

“Every time I see you, you’ve changed so much.” She takes his face between her tiny hands to observe him carefully, and once she’s satisfied she presses a soft kiss to his forehead. “Oh, I’ve missed you so.” She pulls him into another hug and he sets his bag down on the porch step for this one. “We’re going to have so much fun this summer.” She promises, and he can’t help but grin a little.

“Jonathan, your bags.” Joyce reminds him as she steps up the stairs, Jonathan steps down and begins to walk back to the car as the woman hugs her mother. His two bags are settled on the ground next to the car, he simply lifts them up and heads back over to the porch.

“What a big strong man you’ve grown into, Jonathan.” Nana says with a bright smile, Jonathan feels his cheeks heat up in response as his mother grabs his backpack for him and follows him into the house. “You’ll stay in yours and Will’s old room,” The woman tells him with a wave of her hand, Jonathan nods and takes his backpack from his mother before heading up the stairs.

The house smells old, not in a bad way, just like some old house. Nana had been living here for as long as Jonathan could remember, of course it was with grandpa for a while but he had passed away in his sleep when Jonathan was eleven. Whenever they came to visit, she was always happy to see them, but she insisted that she was okay on her own. Jonathan realized that it might be nice to give her some long term company for a while.

He sets his bags down in the room often occupied by himself and Will during their visits, then steps out of the room. Jonathan walks down the stairs with a few loud creaks and when he finds the living room empty, heads into the kitchen.

“Sure you won’t get sick of me?” Jonathan questions as he leans against the door frame, watching his grandmother pour Joyce a cup of coffee.

“Of course not, honey, you’re my second favorite grandson!” She says teasingly, Jonathan’s jaw drops in mocking shock. Joyce smirks a little at him and nana laughs in delight, she always was full of joy and humor.

“I see how it is, nana.” He snorts, stepping further into the room and sitting down at the table. His nana smiles kindly at him and ruffles his hair as she passes, he fixes it as she sets Joyce’s cup on the table top. “Can I have a cup?” He asks, already ready to stand up and get it himself.

“Since when do you drink coffee?” His grandmother asks, eying him hesitantly as Jonathan smiles at her.

“Since I don’t want to fall back asleep after I wake up early in the morning.” He replies easily, smiling as he gets up. “I can make it,” He promises, and when he steps over to the coffee pot, he glances back at his grandmother. “Want me to make you a cup, nana?” He questions, the woman looks slightly surprised but nods her head as she sits down next to Joyce.

“I can tell I’m going to like having such a helpful boy around the house these next few months.” She comments with a small smile, Joyce looks over at Jonathan and for a moment their eyes meet, he can see she’s internally worrying about him already.

“He’s very helpful,” Joyce promises quietly, nodding her head as Jonathan returns with two cups of coffee.

“Fetch the cream, will you, Jonathan?” The older woman asks, and he nods before walking over to the fridge. He never minded helping out around the house, he had followed Joyce around all his young life and often found happiness helping her with things. He returns and they all settle in sipping at their coffee, which is rich and sweet with the help of a little sugar.

Jonathan drinks his black with sugar; it’s less about the taste and more about the caffeine. He doesn’t sleep a lot, his anxiety makes him restless and it’s probably not the best thing to add caffeine to anxiety but he has to be awake so this is how he copes. Sometimes he kept a thermos of coffee next to his bed for late night studying or just to get him through a sleepless night.

They discuss Will and school and Joyce’s new boyfriend Jim Hopper, and then Joyce announces her departure. Jonathan and his grandmother follow Joyce out onto the porch; she hugs nana and then Jonathan steps behind her down to the car. Joyce turns after opening the car door, and she pulls her eldest into a tight hug.

“I want phone calls and letters of how you’re doing.” She mumbles against his shoulder, he nods his head with a quiet sigh. “I love you, sweetheart.” She leans up on her toes to kiss his cheek, and he steps back so she can get in her car.

“Love you too,” He says, watching her close the door. He waves at her as she backs out of the driveway, and then watches the

dust billow up behind the car as she disappears down the dirt road once more. It dawns on him as he watches her car turn out of sight that he's never been away from her longer than a week or two (during his own summer camp days, which were often cut short when he ended up calling home because kids picked on him). But he had his grandmother, and he supposed that was the next best thing.

"Come on inside, angel. You should unpack before you wander off." His grandmother calls his attention away from his thoughts, and he gives one final glance towards the road before heading back inside behind the older woman.

He unpacks his clothes in the dresser, sets a picture of him and Will on his side table and then starts digging through his backpack. He had brought along his Walkman, spare batteries, his camera and some extra camera rolls (enough to last him the summer if he spread them out). He pulls out some of his favorite pictures from a pocket in his bag; he kept them with him for when he was sad. Most of them were pictures of Will and his mother. There was one of Will and Jonathan asleep on the couch together that his mother had taken the year before, and it was definitely something he treasured.

He missed Will already, and he was glad that his mother had left him the address of his summer camp to send letters to. Will would be away for three weeks; Jonathan would be gone almost three months… The idea of it seems insane but if he had to choose a second home it would probably be his grandmother's house, even if he wasn't too familiar with the town it was located in.

When he heads back down the stairs, his grandmother is peeking out the front window through the curtain. Jonathan makes sure his approaching steps are loud enough so that she heard him

coming. He had a habit of being rather silent whilst moving, and as a child he had scared his grandmother and grandfather half to death on occasion when he walked up when they weren't looking.

"There are some boys your age that go down to the lake sometimes, I'm sure you could make friends with them." She tells him as she turns to look back at him with a soft smile, her eyes crinkling at the edges and showing off her laugh lines.

"I'm not too good with kids my age, nana." He explains hesitantly, glancing away from her curious expression.

"Is that the reason your mom is so worried?" She questions softly, he can feel a blush building in his cheeks. "Sweetheart, you've always been a little shy but it's not like you can't make friends." She murmurs, he feels a bit of anger well in his stomach.

"Everyone hates me; they think I'm a freak." He huffs, crossing his arms defensively and turning away. "It doesn't matter; everyone my age is either a jerk or an idiot." He snaps, frowning when his grandmother places a gentle hand on his arm.

"You are not a freak, you are one of the sweetest people I've ever met and you've got my sense of humor." She says kindly with a grin of her false teeth, Jonathan deflates a little and reaches up to run his fingers through his hair. "Just because those kids from home treat you like that doesn't mean everyone will, you can try to make friends with some of the boys down at the lake. And if they're rude to you then you can tell them to go to hell and we can spend the summer making cookies." She promises, Jonathan can't help but smile.

“That’s a lot of cookies,” He comments quietly.

“Well it’s a good thing you like cookies so much,” She pokes his stomach and his hands unwind to block her hand from his ticklish middle. “Does that sound good?” She asks, taking his hand into her own and squeezing it gently.

“Yeah, nana… Sounds great.” He nods his head in agreement, leaning forward to press a kiss to her forehead. She reminded him of his mother in a lot of ways, she was one of the few people that could cheer him up.

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Jonathan takes his camera out of the house and down towards the lake, stepping through the tall grass and hoping he doesn’t get bitten by a snake as he does so. When he reaches the lake he realizes it was a lot smaller than he remembered. It wasn’t extremely small, but also not as huge as it once had seemed to him. It’s not clear or beautiful, the water is slightly murky and there are weeds near the edges. But there’s a rope swing not far away connected to a tree that he knows must be a hot spot from the lack of weeds there and the way the rope looked old and overused.

There’s nobody around, but the trees growing around the lake are large with sturdy branches so he decides to find himself a place to sit. Jonathan takes a few minutes to pinpoint the best looking tree in the closest vicinity and then stumbles over a few roots to reach the trunk. He pushes his camera around hang backwards off his neck, so it doesn’t get bumped against the trunk as he climbs.

He takes his time, planting his foot firmly into a groove of the tree and hauling himself up to grab onto a branch. He climbs up through the tall branches under the shade of the bright green leaves, staring up at the blue sky through the empty patches before swinging his leg over a branch. Jonathan settles down carefully on the branch, bringing his camera back around to rest on his chest before leaning back against the trunk of the tree.

He snaps a few shots, but nothing really stands out that much too him. The air has that distinct nature smell he's always loved but the smell of the muddy lake water is just on the edge of his senses as well. It was no paradise, but it wasn't half bad watching the water ripple with the cool breeze. Jonathan spends quite a while in quiet, listening to the frogs singing and the crickets chirping as he swings his legs back and forth aimlessly.

The sun peeks through the leaves and thin streams of light shine down on him, creating soft warmth on a few parts of his body as he lazily gazes upwards. Okay, so maybe this summer at nana's house wouldn't be as bad as he thought. He liked being alone, he could just hang out in the trees by the lake all summer. It would be a nice change of scenery from the woods behind his house, which was often muddy and the trees weren't the right type for climbing. He closes his eyes and crosses his arms, tipping his head over slightly against the trunk and allowing himself to relax.

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Jonathan is startled from his easy doze from the sound of talking and laughing, he almost falls out of the tree for a moment before he locks his thighs around the branch and grabs onto a smaller

one above his head for balance. He blinks a few times and focuses on a few kids just across the way, headed over to the rope swing with towels around their necks and slung over their shoulders.

Jonathan brings his legs up onto the branch he's resting on and grabs another branch to lift himself to his feet. He starts climbing again, higher this time as to not be seen. He watches through some patches in the leaves as he moves further up, two of the boys are chasing one another and pushing and shoving. There are three boys and two girls, Jonathan finds a large branch near the top of the tree that's heavily disguised with leaves and sits down.

As a kid, Jonathan was never quite accepted into social circles. Any gatherings of kids were often only around Jonathan to insult his clothes or throw rocks at him, it's interesting to watch them interact from afar. He rather enjoyed observing people from afar, it made him feel less pressured and it was easier to take in information and details without being so anxious about interacting.

He leans forward a little, watching as one of the boys race right up to the hill leading to the rope swing. Jonathan watches as he leaps forward and grabs onto the rope, legs swinging forward and he lands with a noisy splash into the water. Jonathan brings up his camera and adjusts the lens to get a closer look, he takes a few shots. Maybe if he could figure out how these kids worked he might be able to make friends with them eventually.

Jonathan watches for a few hours, and even after he gets bored he realizes he can't get down. If he climbed down now they'd most likely see him and realize he'd been up in the tree this whole time. It was kind of weird to be doing this; he'd be called a freak for sure… He just wanted to know how they could be so normal around each other, how someone could make friends and keep them around.

Had they known each other from childhood, was there some epic story about how they met?

It almost made him angry, he always felt like an outsider, like people had been taught something from day one and it was all kept secret from him. His little brother was shy like him, but he had made his little friends without a problem. Jonathan didn't have a bunch of nerdy guys to hang out with, or even a best friend that he'd been with from childhood. The only friend he had as a child was his GI Joe Astronaut, and that had been snatched from him by one of the boys at school and had its head removed.

Even the people he had things in common with, the kids with his taste in music, or his love of photography, they didn't like him. Sometimes he just thought he might be broken, like something had gone wrong before birth and he was just a mistake.

"Not like you're good for anything anyway, you're just a mistake."

His father had insisted it for years, maybe he was right…

Jonathan sighs and scrubs a hand over his face, watching one of the boys float along the water calmly while the other two splashed with each other and occasionally at the girls near the edge. How could something so simple to everyone else be the thing that eluded Jonathan his entire life?

Jonathan can hear the kids talking but he's not close enough to hear what they're saying, he scoots farther down the branch he's on and climbs down a branch to get onto a longer and

thicker limb. He squats down, still holding tight to the branch above him as he sinks down with both of his legs on one side of the branch. He leans forward and peeks through the leaves, straining to hear even a little of the conversation but falling short.

In a few minutes, the kids leave, and Jonathan waits a bit before climbing down and heading back to the house. He wades through the tall grass and into his grandmother's front yard, climbing the steps and opening the screen door.

"Nana, I'm back!"

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Dear Will,

It's only been a week since I got here but I already miss you and mom a lot. It's kind of boring here, but nana doesn't let me stay in my room after eight in the morning and I'm not allowed to come back to the house until lunch. She seems to be doing okay on her own, but I think she really misses grandpa. Her homemade pie is still the best in the world, I bet you're jealous that you're over there and not here! It's not so bad, there's a lot of spiders though, hopefully I don't get turned into a mutant ninja spider or whatever. No luck yet with making friends, but I'm working on it. I really hope you and your friends are having fun at camp, I'll make sure to take some pictures to show you later.

Love, Jonathan.

He seals up the envelope and plants a stamp from the packet of them his grandmother had given to him on the corner of it. He writes the

address and the return before grabbing his other addressed to his mother, he'd always been better with the written word than phone calls. His mother knew this; she probably wouldn't call unless he didn't try to contact her for a while.

"Nana, I'm heading out." He says as he exits the front door, turning his head to look at where she sits reading in her rocking chair on the front porch. The woman looks up at him with a small smile, then stands up and leans over to grab something off of the stool near the chair.

"You'll get sunburned if you aren't careful." She tosses him a ball cap, it's dark green and Jonathan brushes his thumb over a familiar wearing in the seam near the back of it. It was his grandfather's, he never went anywhere without it. Jonathan looks back up at his grandmother and steps forward to pull her into a hug. "You remind me of him, you know?" She whispers into his shoulder, and he chuckles quietly as they release one another.

"Thanks nana, I'll take good care of it." He promises, slipping the cap onto his head and turning to jog down the porch steps.

"Be back for lunch, sweetheart!" She calls; he waves a hand before heading down the dirt road towards the mail box. He kicks a couple of rocks, unable to stop smiling as he adjusts the hat on his head. Jonathan makes his way over to the mail box, which is just across the street from the end of the dirt road leading up to the house. He sticks the two letters in and closes up the box, turning away and glancing up at the sun above.

He had spent most of his time down at the lake or in the

woods so far, but that was getting a little boring… He decides then to head into town, it would only be about ten minutes to walk there, so he starts off down the edge of the street.

A few cars pass, an old man waves at him and he returns the gesture. He sticks his hands in his pockets and wonders what Will was up to right at this moment. They were never bored down at that camp, Jonathan remembered it from his youth. Lots of activities and fun games to play, and Will had lots of nerdy little buddies at camp along with his usual friends from home. He'd probably be swimming or hiking in the woods, maybe fishing. He just hoped he had fun; he wanted nothing but the best for his baby brother.

It takes him a little longer than previously thought but he reaches the town in about fifteen minutes, he checks his watch before crossing the street and walking down the sidewalk. There weren't a lot of people about but enough for it not to seem like a ghost town, a few younger kids pass on bikes. A young girl around Will's age waves at him. He waves back and she giggles and looks to her friend, who seems equally delighted.

He observes the shop windows as he passes, finding nothing out of the ordinary. He feels a little disappointed; he needed something to do that he could tell his mother and Will about. He didn't want them to worry so much anymore, he needed to fix everything. He glances down at his sneakers on the pavement as he walks, enjoying the sound of his footsteps and stepping over the cracks in the sidewalk.

"I've never seen you around," Jonathan startles, glancing up and finding a young man sitting on the brick ledge of a shop window. He's got a Styrofoam cup in his hand and is fitted in a pair of tight jeans and a loose gray t-shirt. He quickly realizes he's one of

the kids that frequent the lake near his grandmother's house, the group he'd spied on twice since his first day. He feels his cheeks begin to redden at the thought of being caught, and he ducks his head slightly to avoid the boy's curious gaze.

"I'm staying for the summer with my grandmother," He admits quietly, watching the boy get up from his spot to stand in front of Jonathan. He's got on a nice pair of sneakers, and Jonathan remembers the times in his younger years when his father would grab him by the head and make him look at him.

"Why are you staring at the floor, Jon? I'm up here!"

He looks up, meeting a perplexed and slightly judging face of the teenaged boy before him. He has dark brown eyes and short hair gelled up slightly, and lots of freckles on his cheeks. Jonathan mentally scolds himself for staring and holds out his hand, smiling awkwardly.

"Jonathan Byers," He greets hesitantly, the guy grimaces and takes his hand to shake.

"Yeah, whatever, kid." He mutters, glancing back as a few other kids walk out of the shop they were standing in front of. The rest of the kids from the lake, Jonathan can feel his face get even redder. "It's about damn time!" He throws his hands up in exasperation, Jonathan watches the girls roll their eyes and one of the boys snickers and whispers something to his friend.

"Don't get your panties in a twist, Tommy." One boy says to the teen Jonathan just shook hands with, before all of their eyes

trail to the newcomer of the group.

"Who's this?" One girl with red hair questions with a raised eyebrow.

"Just some geek," And there it is. Jonathan ducks his head as one of the other boys snorts quietly, the other girl with blonde hair smacks Tommy on the shoulder and hisses at him quietly. "Let's go, we're gonna miss the movie!" Tommy insists, and they all move past him with a few lingering glances. Jonathan leans against the building he's standing in front of, sighing heavily and running a hand through his hair.

So much for making friends.

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Jonathan finds a library, he was never really one for reading but he was kind of bored and sad so he decided to peruse the selection of books. There aren't many people inside, just a kid reading a little picture book and a woman browsing the historical fiction section. Jonathan starts looking for some sort of mystery book to read, and eventually he ends up sitting down at a table and getting into it for a bit.

When he looks down at his watch he realizes it's five minutes till noon and quickly stands up to find where he had pulled the book from. He gets the book back into its place (or at least close to it) and then hurries from the library. He walks quickly through town and down the street; he starts running when he gets to the dirt

road.

He races up the porch steps and pulls open the screen door, stepping inside and pausing to catch his breath. Jonathan takes off his cap and tucks it in his jean pocket, brushing his hair from his eyes and walking into the living room towards the kitchen.

“Nana, I’m back.” He says as he steps into the kitchen, finding the woman already eating a sandwich with a fixed plate sitting ready for him across from her.

“Lose track of time?” She smiles at him gently as he approaches the table and sits down, he nods his head.

“I was at the library.” He admits and she nods her head as she sips at her drink. “I’m not really a big reader, but I need to find something to do.” He shrugs a little, picking up his sandwich and taking a bite of the crust.

“No luck with the kids down at the lake?” She asks casually, Jonathan takes another bite of his crust with a sigh.

“I saw some of them in town, I tried but…” He frowns, shaking his head and glancing away as he sets his sandwich down and reaches out to grab his glass. “The guy I talked to was a jerk; I’m just not cut out for stuff like this.” He mutters, wrapping his lips around his straw and busying himself with drinking as to not speak.

“Maybe you’ll find someone else,” His grandmother offers optimistically, and Jonathan frowns down at the contents of his cup. He watches the ice cubes clink together quietly as they swirl in his glass of lemonade, unable to find even a little bit of positivity at the moment. He had the urge to go upstairs and lock himself in his room, but he knew that would only worry his grandmother.

“I’ll be fine; it’s not that bad around here.” He admits quietly, peeling off the rest of his crust and shoving it into his mouth.

“I never understood why you did that,” She laughs quietly as she observes him, he feels a blush on his cheeks as he chews. “You hate the crust,” She insists, and he shrugs.

“I gotta get it out of the way so I can get to the good part.” He explains with a cheek full of crust, the woman chuckles and shakes her head fondly.

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The first few times were just observation but now Jonathan felt really guilty about sitting up in his regular spot and spying on the kids at the lake. He’d found a different tree after the first time to sit in, where he could hear most of what the teens said and see them a little better. He didn’t bring his camera anymore, he just wanted to watch. It made him feel like he was part of something, like he wasn’t so alone. He could imagine that he was hanging out with his friends, and that they just usually left him to sit in the tree while they swam, to give him some alone time.

He knew Tommy's name, and there was a girl whose name is Paula, but the other two boys and girl he wasn't sure yet. He'd been watching them for almost three whole weeks now; he should have known it wasn't long before he'd get caught.

Jonathan's sitting on the branch, watching Paula argue with one of the boys across the lake. He grabs her around the waist and throws her in, Jonathan smiles a little at the sound of their laughter. They splash and the redheaded girl leaps into the water after them, all of them shouting and having a great time.

"Hey!" Jonathan jumps, head turning to find Tommy standing just under the tree.

"Shit," He mumbles, mouth hanging open in a nervous stammer of a noise.

"What the fuck are you doing up there, you pervert?" Jonathan can hear the others falling quiet at their friend's exclamations and he already knows this isn't going to end well. He was treed; there was no way to get down without getting his ass kicked.

"I was just…" He shakes his head, unable to come up with anything that would have the remote possibility of him not getting injured.

"Get down here so I can beat your ass." Tommy demands, and that doesn't sound like the best idea so he starts to stand. He pulls himself further up the tree; maybe if he just stays up here they'll

get bored and go away. The other kids are gathering around the base of the tree, the girls making very expressive noises of disgust. He watches Tommy lean down and hurriedly grabs onto a branch above him, lifting his feet off of the branch he's perched on.

"Tommy, don't, dude." He hears one of the teens say before something hard knocks into Jonathan's head and his body's momentum is knocked back. His fingers slip from the branch he's holding onto and he tumbles from the tree, knocking against a few branches before landing on his front with the air knocked out of him and the black behind his eyelids flashing with bright white spots.

He can hear laughing over the roar of blood in his ears, and he can't find it in himself to get up, his body shaking from the adrenaline and pain coursing through him from the harsh fall.

"Tommy, what the fuck, man?" A boy's voice exclaims, and someone moves closer but Jonathan can't run for it because he feels like if he moves he might just throw up. He believes he landed on a root sticking out of the ground from the pain radiating from his lower stomach, and his body is stinging from getting all scraped up.

"Not like he didn't deserve it," Tommy insists angrily, the girls are muttering uncertainly and there's a hand resting gently on his back.

"What if he's really hurt?" That's one of the girls, he can't tell who though. Everything is a little fuzzy and his cheek is resting on the dirt, he can taste blood and his head is throbbing with every beat of his heart. "What if he's dead?!"

“I’m not sticking around to find out, let’s go.” One of the other boys says, and then there are footsteps splashing through the water and away from them.

“We can’t just leave him!” That’s the same voice from before, a voice of reason to the group he supposes. But nobody comes back; the rest of the chatter disappears into a faint noise underneath his rushing blood and loudly beating heart.

“Cowards!” The hand on Jonathan’s back moves a little, and then he’s being turned over onto his side gently. It doesn’t feel too gently though, his limbs are stiff with pain and he’s a little afraid to move. His mouth feels numb and there’s a stinging and a metal taste that informs him that he’s definitely bitten his tongue.

“Please wake up,” It’s a boy, definitely, his voice pleading and a little panicked.

Jonathan pries his eyes open and watches the colors in his vision fade away until he can only see one face haloed by the sunshine above. It’s one of the boys whose name he doesn’t know, the one with sort of long hair that’s taller than the rest of them. He’s turned over onto his back, which pulls an involuntary whimper from his throat when his back twinges slightly. All he can think of is how guilty he feels about spying on all of them…

“M’sorry.” He mumbles, it makes something wet drip from the corner of his mouth and from the coppery taste and thick consistency in his mouth he knows it’s most likely blood.

“Jesus Christ,” The boy’s eyes widen, and he looks out of Jonathan’s field of vision and sighs anxiously. “Okay, it’s okay.” He’s talking to himself for a moment, but then he smiles down (it looks more like a grimace) at Jonathan reassuringly. “Hey, man, can you hear me?” He questions softly, Jonathan nods his head slowly, even though it feels like his joints are hardened into place.

The young man slides his hand under Jonathan’s neck and looks away again, as if thinking intensely as his eyebrows furrow together. Jonathan watches him, still too stunned by his presence to reassure him verbally that all he probably needed was some painkillers, some sleep, and a bottle of water to rinse his mouth out.

“Don’t move I’ll be right back.” He says quietly, patting Jonathan’s chest gently before standing up and scrambling away. Jonathan focuses up on the leaves in the tree above him, fluttering noisily and making different patterns with the streams of light running through them as they move. The boy would probably run and that was okay, Jonathan could most likely move himself after a while; he’d just have to sit here for a bit to regain his strength.

But the young man returns, a shaky smile on his face and his shirt on now. He’s got his towel on his shoulder and he picks up Jonathan’s head to slide it under him. He sinks down to sit next to Jonathan, still looking pale with fear but wearing a mask of confidence.

“I’m Steve, by the way.” He offers quietly, his eyes trailing over Jonathan’s body carefully. “I should probably go get someone, but I’m kinda scared to leave you out here by yourself.” He mutters, he reaches out and squeezes Jonathan’s arm gently. “Can you feel

that?" He questions, Jonathan nods, so he moves to the other one.

He takes his time, making sure Jonathan isn't paralyzed or severely injured. By the time he's finished, Jonathan has gotten enough strength to move his limbs a bit and Steve is helping him sit up against the tree.

"You fell so damn far," Steve peers up at the tree; Jonathan keeps his eyes on the young man, noting the scattered freckles on his face. He must have fallen far, he still felt slightly nauseous and shaky, but the pain was starting to override that. "That's gotta be like fifteen feet," Steve murmurs as he stares up above them.

"Goo' thing te'branches broke m'fall." His speech is a little garbled, his tongue stinging in protest and his teeth feeling weird from clacking together so hard on the way down. Jonathan wondered if he was missing any teeth, he'd have to check later. Steve looks back to him with surprise, eyes a little wide, before he snorts softly.

"Well it sounds like you don't have brain damage." He offers humorously in response, Jonathan smiles weakly and reaches up to rub at his stiff neck. The bend of his wrist pulls a hiss from his lips as pain flares in it; Steve reaches out and settles his arm back down into his lap. "Don't move so much, we need to get you some help." He says quietly.

Jonathan turns his head slightly and points to the direction of his grandmother's house with his other hand, earning a scolding noise from Steve as he gently forces his hand back down into a resting position.

“What did I just say?” He says with a scowl, Jonathan turns his head and leans forward a bit to spit blood onto the dirt. “Are you throwing that up or is it coming from your mouth?” Steve asks worriedly, Jonathan can’t help but smile a little.

“Bit m’ tongue,” His words are still lisped but they sound a little clearer now without him having to try and prevent the blood from spilling out of his mouth. “Grandmother’s house s’just over there,” He says with a nod of his head in the proper direction, Steve follows his line of sight and squints.

“Tommy hit you really hard with that rock, are you sure?” He asks, Jonathan snorts and nods his head. “Okay, give me a second and I’ll see where the house is and I’ll come back and get you.” He promises, standing up and stepping over some roots before walking towards the tall weeds and the hill ahead. When he reaches the top of the hill, he turns and comes right back, smiling a little.

“Tol’ you.” He mumbles, Steve scoffs quietly and before Jonathan can try to get up, the other boy has an arm around his back and under his knees to lift him off the ground. Jonathan sucks in a sharp gasp of surprise, quickly clinging to Steve as best he can for fear of being dropped.

“C’mon, don’t you trust me?” Steve jokes as he steps over a root and adjusts his hold on the smaller boy. Jonathan squeezes his eyes shut and prays that Steve has a good grip on him.

“Your frien’ hit me with a rock.” He says in a deadpan, the sarcasm of it sounding more pitiful with his injured tongue. It was starting to feel a little better now, less painful as he got used to the cut on his tongue.

“Tommy’s a prick, always has been.” Steve says quietly as they wade through the tall grass, he readjusts his grip once more and then they’re stepping up the porch. “Is your grandma home?” He questions curiously, Jonathan nods his head and Steve kicks his foot out to make the screen door rattle in an imitation of knocking. “Hello?” He calls.

Jonathan would demand to be put down but he feels weak and he knows that if he tried to stand right now he might just collapse and make himself look more like an idiot. He tries to make himself look a little more… well, not stupid… and Steve turns his head a little.

“What’s your name, again?” He whispers, Jonathan frowns.

“Jonathan,” He croaks, and then his grandmother is at the screen door with a loud gasp.

“Oh my lord, what happened?” She demands with shock at the sight of him, opening the door and ushering them both in. Steve sets Jonathan down on the couch and he tries to keep himself from getting any blood on the cushions. His t-shirt is all torn up, his knees are scraped to hell, there’s blood drying on his forehead from where the rock hit him and he’s covered in all sorts of little scratches and bruises from hitting branches on the way down.

“I fell out of a tree,” He says quietly, his grandmother takes his face gently into her hands and observes him with worried eyes. Jonathan cast his gaze over to where Steve is standing awkwardly in a pair of swim shorts and a damp t-shirt, looking rather

nervous. Jonathan could rat him out, tell her about how his stupid little friends had left him for dead… But that didn't really apply to Steve, he had stayed, he had stood up for Jonathan in a way.

"Do I need to drive you to the hospital?" She asks sincerely, Jonathan shakes his head and shifts uncomfortably on the couch. "I'll go get the first aid kit, then." She says, before turning and hurrying out of the room.

Steve stands awkwardly, and Jonathan would invite him to sit down but he's still a little wet from the lake water and he knew his grandmother wouldn't be too happy about having wet couch cushions. He reaches up to rub at his eye with his good hand, he plants his feet against the floor and pushes himself further back against the couch in an attempt to get comfortable.

"There are towels in the bathroom just through there," He points, Steve frowns and peers behind him warily. "Down the hall and first door on your left, they're in the white cabinet." He explains, and Steve nods his head before turning away and disappearing down the hall.

His grandmother returns, sitting down next to him and turning his head gently to face her. She pulls out a bottle of alcohol and Jonathan knows that the pain had only just begun.

"Where'd your friend go?" She asks quietly, Jonathan winces as she rubs some alcohol covered cotton on the wound on his forehead.

“He was still wet from swimming, I told him to go grab a towel.” He explains softly. “He’s not my friend, he’s just some guy.” He feels he has to say, shrugging a little and hissing when his grandmother wipes at his cut a little harder.

“At least he was kind enough to help you,” She says quietly, turning her head when Steve returns with a towel around his shoulders. “Thank you for helping my grandson.” She says with a small smile, he nods his head and waves shyly.

“He fell pretty far, I couldn’t leave him there…” Steve says, seeming to be speaking sincerely. “For a minute I thought I’d have to run into town for help.” He shakes his head, smiling nervously at Jonathan as he lifts the towel over his head and rubs it over his hair to dry it a little.

“Just how far did you fall?” His grandmother turns to face Jonathan as she moves on to some of the scrapes on his arm.

“Had to be fifteen feet, landed on his face.” Steve states bluntly, inching forward and sinking down onto his knees in front of the couch.

“Jonathan!” His grandmother says, her voice slightly scolding in a worried tone.

Steve reaches out and takes Jonathan’s arm gently to observe his wrist; Jonathan flexes his fingers and grimaces as he tries to bend it. There’s a weird intimacy with the other boy’s warm hand holding his so very gingerly, he can feel a light blush forming across

his nose and cheeks. Steve frowns a little and leans against the couch a little, propping one arm on the cushions.

"You should probably put ice on that," He says quietly.

"The kitchen is right in there; there are some little baggies in the drawer to the right of the fridge." His grandmother says with a wave of her hand.

"Nana!" Jonathan whines quietly, earning quite the glare in response. "I'm sure Steve doesn't want to hang around playing doctor." He mumbles, avoiding the other teen's eyes as he says so.

"I don't mind, you sort of traumatized me with that fall." He snorts, getting to his feet.

"I traumatized *you*?" He demands in mock outrage, listening to Steve laugh as he walks into the kitchen. Jonathan can't help the smile on his face, and when he catches his grandmother's eye she's smirking smugly.

"Not friends, huh?" She murmurs, he pouts as she cleans a scrape on his knee.

Steve returns with the bag of ice, throwing it over to Jonathan, who catches it with only a small fumble. Steve sets his towel on the couch cushion and sits down next to the smaller boy, wrapping his arm over the back of the couch. Jonathan carefully

settles the bag of ice over his swelling wrist, the cold is instant and a little painful but it soon radiates out into his wrist and soothes the ache in the slightest.

"You need to be more careful, sweetheart." His grandmother scolds as she stands up and sighs quietly; he tilts his sore neck back to look up at her with a sheepish smile. "Or else I'm going to have to send you out every day with a helmet and protective gear." She jokes, which earns a soft snort from Steve.

"Sorry, nana." He apologizes to reassure her; the older woman reaches out and combs her fingers through his messy hair, holding out a small twig as she pulls away. Jonathan reaches up with a small smile and runs his fingers through his hair to remove any remaining debris from his fall.

"Steve, I'm making lunch, would you like to join us?" She questions with a cross of her arms, and Jonathan winces just a little. Steve wouldn't want to hang around here for too long; Jonathan was just some creep that had been peeping on him and his friends. The only reason they had kept quiet about the true incident was that Steve's friend was just as guilty of something as Jonathan.

"Sure, miss…" His voice trails off and he seems genuinely embarrassed having not known the older woman's name.

"It's Trudy… Trudy Williams, but all the kids call me nana." She winks at him teasingly and he smiles with delight.

"I would love to join you and your grandson for lunch,

nana.” He says cordially, the woman shoots another smug look towards Jonathan before turning and heading into the kitchen.

“I hope you like pizza!” She calls as she steps away. Pizza really did sound good, even though it would most likely make the cut on his tongue sting, he looked forward to it. He hoped Steve didn't mind plain cheese, Jonathan was never too fond of toppings and his grandmother was very kind about it.

“Is the Pope Catholic?” Steve says back with a grin, stretching out a little and draping his arm over the back of the couch. His behavior was so odd, something so easy and confident; Jonathan couldn’t understand how he was so okay with it all. He just let things happen, if this was Jonathan he would have been out the door as soon as possible. And yet Steve was casually glancing around the place like he frequented it every day for years and just hadn’t been around in a while.

“So, Jonathan.” He drawls with a smirk, turning green eyes onto him and looking him up and down. “Jonathan Williams?” He questions, Jonathan can’t hold his gaze for long and opts to stare down at his skinned up knees. Williams was his mother's maiden name, Byers he'd gotten from his father. He didn't really like the name most of the time but his mother had always insisted that it wasn't his father's name, it was his name.

“Byers,” He murmurs, and watches Steve’s head bob up and down in a rather exaggerated nod.

“Jonathan Byers, where are you from?” He asks, his leg bouncing up and down, not nervously but filled with energy, restless.

“Indiana,” He admits with a shrug, worrying gently at his bottom lip with his tongue. Steve was being so nice, why couldn’t Jonathan just return the gesture? All that was on his mind was that this was a trick that Steve would report back to his little buddies with all the information on him. That he’d make fun of him, for his clothes, for his shy demeanor, for everything.

“Indiana, I used to live there. Moved around a lot when I was really young, but then we sort of set up camp here and my dad decided I was old enough to be left by myself while my mom wasn’t home so he goes on business a lot.” He nods his head, spilling his life story to Jonathan without a second thought, who does that anyway?

“You’re really weird,” Jonathan blurts suddenly, voice soft and eyes widening when he realizes that he’s just spoken aloud. Steve doesn’t seem mad though, he seems rather amused at this. “I-I mean not *weird* but, you know…” He waves his uninjured hand in a helpless gesture.

“Not weird, but *weird*. Yeah, I got you Jonny boy, I guess we have that in common.” Steve smirks, and Jonathan falls silent, mulling over what had just happened. His cheeks are red with embarrassment, and did Steve just call him *Jonny boy*? Steve’s soft laughter pulls his attention back over to the other boy, who’s grinning ear to ear. “Anyone ever tell you that you look adorable when you blush?”

Jonathan’s cheeks tint darker in response and he scowls a little, if it weren’t for his currently sore and injured state he’d be making a run for his room and locking the door behind him. What was this dude’s game, where did he get off torturing Jonathan like

this? Or… Or was he trying to be nice?

"Are you making fun of me?" He can't help but ask hesitantly, and the grin slips off of Steve's face in response. Was he mad that Jonathan would assume that? Had he broken that secret code that everyone knew about but him?

"N-No dude, it was a joke." Steve assures, and Jonathan can't help but let his eyebrows scrunch together in confusion. "You sure you didn't hit your head that hard?" Teenagers were so damn confusing, it seemed like Steve genuinely felt bad for him but then again he seemed to be having the time of his life just a moment ago at his expense!

"I'm not good with this stuff," Jonathan shakes his head, wiping his hand down his dirty face with a sigh.

"With what?" Steve frowns at him, and Jonathan can feel the faint remnants of his blush still on his cheeks.

"Having friends." He says quietly, fidgeting with the bag of ice that was quickly melting on his wrist. "That's what this is, right? Friends?" He can't help but ask, and Steve's looking at him like he's an alien from outer space once more, this definitely isn't going well.

"Yeah, sure, Byers." He agrees slowly, before he smiles a little and holds his hand out. Jonathan takes it gingerly and Steve shakes his hand, his grip firm and his hands much bigger than Jonathan's.

“Steve, I hope you like cheese pizza, it’s all that Jonathan eats.” Jonathan’s grandmother says as she leans in the doorway, Steve releases Jonathan’s hand and waves at her casually.

“Perfectly acceptable, my dear, wouldn’t want to upset the patient.” He turns to glance at Jonathan when the older woman laughs softly and disappears back into the kitchen; he winks at Jonathan with a smirk. “Don’t look so stressed, Jonny, you’re having pizza with one of the most handsome men in Iowa.” He chuckles, and that’s definitely a joke.

“Low standards,” He retorts simply, and then quickly snaps his mouth shut and blinks down at his lap. Mistake, that was definitely a mistake, Steve would probably hit him or storm out. He can remember the countless times where his dry humor got his ass kicked, at home or at school.

“Well, well, well!” Steve laughs with amusement. “Jonny boy bites back! Good to see you actually do have a sense of humor.” He pats Jonathan’s back gently and the smaller boy can’t help but smile just a little in relief despite the small ache in his back from his earlier injuries, he could handle this hopefully. He could navigate having a friend, if it just stayed like this for a while, let him figure out exactly how to function.

“I might be weird but I’m not dull,” Jonathan promises, and Steve’s still smiling so this has to be going well! He shifts a little and cranes his neck in attempt to get the stiffness out of it, he’d definitely be sore for the next few days.

“I’m gonna go help your grandma out, why don’t you relax?” Steve says as he gets to his feet, and Jonathan can’t do anything but nod mutely as the other ruffles his hair and then steps out of the room.

He kicks off his shoes and carefully pulls his legs up on the couch, lying back against the cushions with a quiet groan. Jonathan listens as Steve converses easily with his grandmother, like he was born to talk with people. He can’t believe he made a friend that’s such a talker, the complete opposite of him, but he can’t find it in him to care. He listens to his grandmother laugh with delight at something Steve says, and he closes his eyes to just rest for a bit. Yeah, this summer stay wasn’t so bad after all. Will and his mom would definitely be hearing about this in the next letter.

2. Bike Rides and Poloroids

Jonathan should have known that the lunch with Steve was a fluke, because even though that afternoon had been pretty great (well, besides the whole falling from a tree thing) he hadn't seen the boy since then. They had eaten pizza and Jonathan had listened to Steve chatter about anything and everything, joking and talking with animated gestures and big smiles. He was so charismatic and had amazing social skills. Jonathan figured that spending some time with him might just help his own problems with making friends.

He never used to plan ahead when it came to other people, but something about Steve's positive energy made him hopeful that they might be able to talk more than once. However, this seemed to not be the case after a week of not seeing his face once. Of course maybe he was just being a bit over dramatic, Steve had a life, he didn't promise to come over at any point.

So he goes about his business, helps his grandmother and reads at the library and goes for walks around the lake. He avoids the group of kids that frequent the lake, he had been sore for a few days and the abrasion on his forehead from the rock thrown at him was still healing. He keeps his hat on and his head down, worried that people might ask what happened even though nobody has glanced at him twice since the day he got there. The lady at the grocery store smiles at him now when he checks out, and she does comment on the nasty scrape on his head at first but he brushes it off easily.

Jonathan finds comfort in a new routine, but he still can't help but feel lonely and sad despite everything. His problems varied from being vaguely uncomfortable in his day to day life to being filled with crushing desolate sadness in the late hours of the night until he was choking on tears. However, his grandmother's house is big so it would be easy to cry without being heard. Fortunately, he had yet to

have the urge to have a complete breakdown, so for now he was just biding his time by committing his ritual motions on a daily basis.

He'd started to wake up earlier in the morning now, usually up and dressed before his grandmother came around to kick him out of the house. She didn't have to now, he went out willingly and explored about the field and was slowly starting to edge his way into the woods just south of the house near the lake. The summer air was a bit sticky but there was usually a slight breeze to accompany it, making trips outside more comfortable than if the air was still.

Jonathan had gotten a library card and had checked out a book he'd found decently interested, something larger than those he read on the premise of the library for little stints of time. He had never quite been interested in reading before, but now he found it a welcome distraction from the loneliness. If he paired it with a perfect track from one of his mixtapes, he could lose himself in another world.

Jonathan makes his way out into the trees after lunch with his book, still munching on a freshly made oatmeal raisin cookie as he gazes around at the giants towering above him and shading the ground below with their large canopies of leaves. He shoves the rest of his cookie in his mouth and pulls his headphones up off of his shoulders and onto his ears, clicking the play button on his Walkman and letting the sound of familiar guitar riffs and emotionally charged words fill his ears as he sinks down at the base of a tree.

The young man pries open the obviously well-loved book, its pages crisp but easy to turn and soft to the touch. The parchment smell fills his nostrils as he sucks the bits of cookie from his teeth with his tongue, his eyes falling onto the first few words of the first chapter.

Jonathan is still except the occasional small shift of his body to keep his limbs from going numb and the routine flip of a page as his eyes settle over the words and drink the story in with rapt attention. He remembers reading comic books a few years before when they were still interesting to him, wishing he might come to be some sort of superhero or a person of importance to be sent on a quest of epic proportions. How his life might be if he was as charming, as eloquent and optimistic as some of the fictional characters that he grew to know through the words and pictures written about them.

He screams when something, nay someone, drops down right in front of him. His back digs into the bark of the tree and his heart is pounding as his book flips closed and tips off of his lap, between the edge of his crossed of legs and those of the young man seated across from him. It's Steve, and even the realization of who it was doesn't make him any less startled. Steve is looking a bit stunned himself, eyes wide and mouth curled up in the beginnings of a hesitant smile.

Jonathan yanks his headphones off of his ears and onto his neck, still breathing a little heavy and his heart thudding loudly in his chest as he starts to calm.

"I said your name like eight times, man." Steve offers in his defense, and Jonathan can't help but frown at him before reaching for his book. Steve beats him to it, snatching the book up and scanning over the cover and then flipping it open to glance over the words of one of the pages. "A bookworm, huh?" He asks with a small smile.

"No, there's just nothing to do around here." He grabs the book back a little rougher than he meant to, and glances away when Steve

looks to him as if he were trying to figure out if Jonathan was genuinely angry with him or not. He wasn't of course, perhaps a little irritated at being so sincerely frightened, but not angry.

Steve must find an answer at some point despite the fact that Jonathan was decidedly not looking at him anymore, because he soon returns to his usual cheerfulness without another word.

"Wrong, sir!" He objects, reaching out and tugging at the wires of Jonathan's headphones teasingly. "You just don't know where to look." He says conspiratorially, his mouth a mischievous smirk when Jonathan looks up at him once more.

"Is this going to end with me falling out of another tree?" He asks wryly as Steve gets to his feet and dusts his tightly fitted jeans off. He was wearing a rather revealing tank top that showed off his shoulders and a lot of his freckles along them and his collar bones. Jonathan's mouth twitches a little before he refocuses on Steve's face; the young man has his hands on his hips and is staring him down with a blatant curiosity.

"How's that doing, anyway?" He reaches out and taps the bill of Jonathan's cap, making it shift up to reveal the sight of the soon to be healed scrape on his forehead.

"I've dealt with worse," Jonathan offers without hesitation, and then they're staring at each other intensely, as if waiting for one of them to break eye contact or composure or something of that nature. But Steve simply shifts his jaw a little and purses his lips a little, nodding his head.

"Same here," He agrees, and then turns his head away, Jonathan continues to stare. Steve runs his hand through his long hair to push it out of his face, and Jonathan can't help but slip his hat off for a moment to do the same to his own out of some odd compulsion. "So let's go then, we don't have all day." He waves a hand at Jonathan, who stands up as quickly as he can without flailing too much. Steve doesn't laugh at him, just turns on his heel and starts walking back the way Jonathan had come with a pep in his step and a carefree whistle that echoed around them.

"How old are you?" The question is blurted without a second thought, sometimes it just happened, he couldn't control himself. Steve had to be older than him, was already about a head taller than him. He wasn't muscled and he didn't appear to have any facial hair, but his jaw was a little squarer and his features had a sharpness to them that screamed him and puberty were good friends and had been for a little bit. Jonathan felt tiny chasing after him, like some kid on the coattails of someone they looked up to. Steve doesn't seem to find fault in his sudden inquiry, instead looks back at him with a small smile that seemed sincere.

"Sixteen, how old are you, Jonny boy?" He shoves his hands in his pockets and his fast paced walking turns into a leisurely stroll so Jonathan can walk beside him rather than behind him.

"Fifteen," He replies with a nod, tucking his book against his side and fidgeting with his headphone cord as his eyes scan the trees ahead of them. "My birthday's in March." He feels compelled to add, just to make sure Steve realized he was hanging out with a kid that was barely pubescent. He wasn't sure why, it sort of felt like a way to sabotage the friendship, something he often did for no reason. He was just a few months over fifteen, although he's sure Steve could see that was painfully obvious. Jonathan is scrawny and baby faced, with a mop of hair that often made him look even younger somehow. His dad always griped at him to cut it, he supposed it was a way of

rebelling.

"That's cool," Steve replies with another steady nod, not teasing him for his age or commenting on how small Jonathan was. "Your grandma said you have a little brother, yeah?" He questions as they step from the shade of the trees and out into the sun, Jonathan adjusts his hat and watches Steve squint against the light that shined down on his face without mercy.

"Yeah," He confirms, and then scrambles to continue when Steve glances to him with a quirked eyebrow. "His name's Will, he's ten." And then after a small pause, he adds "Eleven in April." Steve continues his steady nodding, not looking at Jonathan but still making sure he knew he was listening. It was comforting, to hold a conversation but not being the focal point of attention while he speaks. He had always hated speaking because it meant being stared at constantly.

"Must be nice, it's only me and my parents at my place." Steve tells him in turn, and Jonathan hums in acknowledgment.

He wondered if Steve's parents ever considered having another kid, hell, Jonathan's parents hadn't even considered having a first kid. Jonathan had been an accident and his father never wasted a moment to remind him, although his mother had often called him a wonderful surprise. He was the reason his parents got married in the first place.

They had been high school sweethearts and Jonathan had been conceived during the tail end of senior year, when his mom was almost eighteen and his father was going on twenty. It was known as an honorable thing to marry the woman you got pregnant, but

Jonathan often thought that in this instance it hadn't been.

Will had been planned to an extent, during the time in which Joyce and Lonnie had been getting along pretty well. But that was only four years after Jonathan had been born, and although he never talked with his mother about it, he was pretty sure it wasn't too good then either. But he supposed that out of all that bad, he had gotten Will, so it all played out decently in his favor.

"NASA to Jonathan," A hand waves in front of his face and he snaps from his thoughts, blinking up at the older boy, who's staring at him with vague concern. "You zoned out on me, space cadet." He chuckles teasingly, and Jonathan can feel his cheeks starting to heat with a faint blush as they continue walking through the field towards the house.

"Sorry, thinking." He mumbles, and Steve makes an indiscernible face before looking over towards the house. "I just need to put my book away." He explains, and Steve looks at him once more like he's lost his mind.

"You said that already." He informs Jonathan awkwardly, and Jonathan nods his head quickly to avoid any other uncomfortable conversation. He hurries up the porch and inside, gazing around for any sight of his grandmother.

"Nana!" He calls, walking around the house in search of the older woman.

"In here, angel!" The woman steps from the laundry room with a

basket of clothes in her hands. "Steve found you, didn't he?" She questions immediately with a hesitant smile and a gentle hand to his cheek, he nods and they both turn their heads at the sound of the screen door squeaking open.

"I'm just dropping off my book and making sure you know I'll be gone a little while." He explains to her as they walk down the hall and into the living room. Steve is standing near the front door and he offers a blinding smile towards Jonathan's grandmother at the sight of her.

"Lovely to see you again, nana." He waves a hand at her and she smiles sweetly at him in return before setting the basket down on the table.

"Why don't you boys take some cookies and water with you before you leave?" She suggests, and Steve seems delighted by the idea.

"Yeah, sure. Thanks nana!" He calls as he turns and heads up the stairs, listening to Steve's footsteps hurrying up behind him after a moment. He sort of wants to turn around and send him back down, because he wants to change his sweaty shirt but that seemed a little childish. He pushes his door open and steps into the room, setting his book down on his bed. He drops his hat down on the bedside table, ruffling his hair to adjust it.

Jonathan glances back at Steve, who's now standing in the doorway and peering around with interest. He wonders if it's considered weird to change in front of friends... Surely not considering most guys swam shirtless, and everyone in gym changed in front of each other. He doesn't spare another thought over it, simply digging through the dresser and pulling out a new shirt. He

strips out of his sweaty t-shirt and quickly starts fitting his arms through the clean one.

"Is this your brother?" He looks back once more and finds Steve holding the picture of Jonathan and Will asleep on the couch together, a small smile on his face. Jonathan slips his shirt over his head and pulls it down over his skinny torso, crossing his arms as he approaches the older boy.

"Yeah, my mom took that." He tells the other quietly, and Steve's smile seems to grow.

"Cute kid," He comments, and then looks to Jonathan before his eyes pass behind him and light up a little. "You like photography?" He asks as he sets the photograph down gently, stepping around the bed to observe some scattered photos on the desk next to his camera.

"Yeah," Jonathan nods uncomfortably; he never liked people looking at his pictures unless he took them for a specific purpose. He had ones he took for his mother, for Will, but there were some that were meant to be his. He hadn't finished organizing one of his newer batches, from just before his departure from Hawkins.

Steve picks one up and examines it closely, then turns it to Jonathan as the younger approaches hesitantly. It's a picture of the annual barbeque Jonathan and his family often took part in at the home the Wheelers, the middle child Mike was best friends with Will. Jonathan had known the older sister Nancy for years, but they hadn't really talked outside of the occasional passing hellos as their paths crossed.

Will is reaching out towards the camera with a bright grin on his face, the image is a little blurred but yet Jonathan felt like it might just make his personal favorite piles. Will's hair is playfully tussled, there's a glare from the sun behind him that was slowly starting to sink into the trees in the distance, and Mike is in the background with his head thrown back in laughter.

"I never understood how people could make real life look like a fairytale." Steve breathes, sounding in awe as he pulls the picture back to look at it again. His eyes scan over every inch of it, like he's memorizing it and storing it in his brain.

"Fairytales don't exist," Steve looks up at him with an arched brow, and Jonathan is a little surprised at the sudden firmness of his tone, but he continues. "Not everything is sunshine and a rainbow, life just goes by so fast that it's hard to capture the good parts, the parts fairytales are made from." He goes on to explain quietly, stepping up to his desk and picking up a photo.

It's a picture of Jonathan's legs stretched out and the school football field in the distance. He had taken it a few minutes after a kid had spent an entire hour throwing paper and bits of eraser at him during class. He remembered the exact moment, and what he was feeling during it. Lonely, hopeless, and more than a little lost.

"Photos capture moments in time, they hold memories and feelings and..." He shakes his head, lips straightening into a thin line as he stares down at the picture. "Sometimes it's easier to live in a memory than in the present." He mutters, setting the picture down.

Steve is frowning pensively down at the desk, his eyes wandering over the scattered pictures. He reaches out and moves a couple to see

the ones hidden underneath, but the expression stays on his face for a bit.

"You don't have any of you." He says, and Jonathan is instantly filled with an overwhelming amount of discomfort.

It wasn't a lie, he had a few that Will or his mother had taken of him, and as long as someone else was in the picture he kept it if he didn't hate it too much. But seeing himself was more painful than he could bear to admit. It wasn't about self-hatred or dissatisfaction with his body or his face; it was about what he could see in himself that made him feel sick.

He could see the dark circles under his eyes, the often dreary or uncomfortable expressions on his face, the way his shoulders hunched like he had so many secrets to hide. Every time a picture of just him popped up in his developed film he'd spend hours examining it, seeing the lines of exhaustion in his face and the sadness in his eyes. After he had drunk his fill and couldn't look anymore, he would tear it to shreds and push it out of his mind. He'd much rather look at other people; he'd had enough of himself.

"A photographer doesn't have time to pictures of himself; he's too busy taking pictures of everyone else." He dismisses easily, and Steve nods with a frown that expresses a silent 'fair point'. "Besides, it'd get boring looking at just my face, kind of narcissistic really." He adds, and Steve snorts as Jonathan grabs his camera and slips the strap over his head and onto his neck.

"I guess," Steve relents, and turns away from the desk to scan the room. "Ready to go?" He asks, and Jonathan nods his head as he walks over to the bed to put his hat back on.

"Do I get to ask where we're going?" He inquires as they trod down the stairs together, Steve's impish grin gives him his answer and he can't help but roll his eyes.

"Cookies first!" Steve demands before grabbing Jonathan by the wrist and dragging him towards the kitchen without any room for argument.

"Of course," Jonathan smirks as Steve hurries them towards their snacks. He laughs when the older boy shoves an entire cookie in his mouth excitedly while Jonathan packs a few in a baggy.

"Don't forget your water," His grandmother reminds them as she reenters the kitchen, leaning against the counter with a fond smile. Her hair is pulled back and there's a bobby pin near her temple. Steve makes a pleased noise and swallows the rest of his cookie, leaning on the opposite end of the table and grinning at the older woman.

"Nana, not only can you cook a mean pizza, but those cookies are the best thing I've ever eaten in my life." He promises, and the woman laughs with delight.

"Well then you'll have to come around more often, I could use the boost in ego." She teases at him; Jonathan scoffs quietly as he bends over to grab a few bottles of water from the fridge.

"We don't have a bag," He realizes suddenly as he stands with four bottles of water in his hands, two per hand as he turns to face Steve.

The young man tilts his head in response, as if perplexed by Jonathan's words, his bangs try to fall in his face and he drags a hand through his hair to push them back.

"Don't worry about it, we're taking my bike and I've got a basket." The older boy waves a careless hand at him and Jonathan frowns as he settles two bottles on the counter for Steve to grab. Jonathan didn't have a bike, how was he going to keep up with Steve?

"Go on then, boys. Jonathan, I expect you home at seven for dinner. Steve, sweetheart, if your parents are okay with it, you can join us." She offers, and Steve nods his head slowly as if thinking as he grabs the two bottles off of the counter.

"Sounds good, ma'am." He agrees easily after a moment, and then pats Jonathan on the back. "Let's go slowpoke, we're wasting daylight!" He hurries from the room and a few seconds later the screen door is shutting with a clatter of a noise, Jonathan shrugs at his grandmother, who smiles fondly at him.

"He's a good boy, I'm glad you made a friend." She tells him earnestly, and he nods his head before hurrying outside to avoid further conversation.

Steve snatches the bag of cookies from Jonathan when he reaches the bottom of the porch steps, his other hand holding a sleek black bike up by the silver handlebars. He has his two water bottles in the metal wire basket on the front of the bike, he drops the cookies in. Jonathan observes the bike for a moment, there's a tall handle behind the large seat that reminds Jonathan of a bigger version of Michael Wheeler's bike.

"Well are you just going to stand there or are you going to get on?" Steve asks as he swings his leg over the seat and rights the bike between his legs, he laughs a little when Jonathan stares at him dumbly. "Put your water in the basket and hop on the back pegs, Jonny." He instructs, and Jonathan drops his bottles in the basket as told and then moves around.

Indeed there are two pegs on either side of the back wheel, and Steve looks back at him with a nod to assure him it was okay to hop on. Jonathan bites his lip and places his right foot on one peg, grabbing onto Steve's shoulder before pushing up to place his left on the other peg. They wobble a little but Steve keeps them centered, and then he pushes off.

Soon the wind is whipping across his cheeks and they're speeding down the dirt road and onto the street. Jonathan has to take a tight hold of Steve's shoulders and lean slightly when they turn, but it's not as hard to balance as he thought. They race through town, past where Jonathan had visited and further into the winding country roads. He watches scattered houses and trees pass as they ride, there's a small smile on his face as they go.

"Bend your knees, Jonny!" Steve instructs him as they approach a dead end of a road that leads into a stretch of trees that leads on far out into the distance on either side. Jonathan crouches slightly and there's a bump as they hit the end of the road, Steve slows down but doesn't stop, they wind through an obviously well used pathway.

Jonathan has to duck a few times when Steve tells him to just to avoid getting smacked in the face with leaves or clotheslined by a branch. After a few minutes of winding lazily through the path,

taking turns that Jonathan tried to commit to memory, they slow to a stop. Jonathan hops off and Steve settles his bike against a tree as Jonathan steps up to the edge of the path, where it drops off into a rockier path and leads out into a space where there are less trees.

The area isn't very big, and there are quite a few tangles of leaves and vines along the dirt that mostly cover the ground. There are a few trees scattered about, but one stands out in particular. Near the back of the area is a tree with large limbs on it with two long ropes dangling from one of them that led down in two pieces to a plank of wood at the bottom.

He can't help but feel a little excited, this place seemed magical, something out of the fairytales like Steve had said. This was a place where those wonderful moments happened, a place where Jonathan could snap photos and remember the wistful feeling of happiness for just a fleeting moment when he looked back on it. He turns his head a little and not far from the middle of the area are two mangled looking trees with a large hammock tied between them.

"Did you do this?" Jonathan questions as Steve steps up next to him, following behind the older as they carefully head down the incline into the bushels of vines and leaves. In most of the places the leaves don't grow past his ankles so he isn't concerned that much, but he does trip a few times on unseen roots sticking from the ground.

"No, some old friends of mine... We used to come back here and play for hours as kids, there's an old tree house not far from here too." He explains with a hitch of his thumb behind them as they wade through the foliage carefully. "A few people come back here sometimes, but the vines are so bad they can't really screw around with one another so it's rare for them to come to this spot." He tells Jonathan as they reach the swing, who nods as he tilts his head up to

stare up at the branch above.

The tree looked healthy and strong, the rope is in good condition if not a little dirty. The wooden plank it's attached to is faded in color but it seems to be a large piece that doesn't seem like it will be breaking any time soon. He brings up his camera and snaps a shot of the swing, taking a few careful steps back and crouching to get a nice angel before taking another picture.

"Well we didn't come all this way just to stare at it, sit down!" Steve urges him with a laugh, and Jonathan glances away shyly as he drops his camera down onto his chest before shuffling over to sit on the swing. He pushes his feet against the floor, sending him back and forth leisurely. He hadn't been on a swing in quite a while, not since he was in elementary school most likely.

He makes a startled noise when Steve gives him a steady push, quickly tightening his grip on the ropes on either side of him and letting his feet fall limp as he's rhythmically pushed higher and higher. The swing gives him an amazing vantage point of the area around them, and he finds himself grinning with delight as he swings back and spots Steve below smiling brightly up at him.

Jonathan was glad that he'd met Steve, even if it wasn't under the best circumstances. He seemed like a genuinely nice person, especially to go as far as inviting him out here and pushing him on the swing like he was some little kid. Steve catches him when he comes down at one point, slowing him marginally until he stops completely. Jonathan can't help but laugh, quiet and giddy, as he stands up.

"Is that a smile I see, Byers?" Steve teases, and Jonathan ducks his

head but can't wipe the stupid smirk off of his face.

"Your turn," He insists to Steve, who without argument quickly hops over the back of the seat to sit down. Jonathan pushes him, and it takes a little longer for Steve to go as high as Jonathan was. But when he gets high enough he starts cheering and laughing, having the time of his life. His joy is practically contagious; Jonathan doesn't even want to stop smiling anymore. He was having a nice time with his new friend, what could be better than this?

Steve drags his feet hard against the ground on his down swing, a cloud of dust stirring up in his wake as Jonathan leans out and grabs the rope handle to assist him in stopping. Steve lets himself swing lazily for a moment with his feet sliding across the dirt. He leans his head against the left rope and looks over at Jonathan with a smile, and the younger shyly returns the gesture.

"Wanna go again?" Steve asks, and Jonathan nods his head. "All right." He grins as he stands up, allowing Jonathan to take his place on the swing. It felt like such a simple act, getting pushed on the swing, but it was nice and it felt almost freeing in a way. He felt normal in that moment somehow, like he was just a kid having fun with his friend, like he didn't have a problem in the world. Maybe that was what friends were for, Jonathan thinks as he swings past Steve at top speed, for helping you live in the moment and forget your troubles.

He lets out a cheerful yell as he gains height, grinning from ear to ear as he hears Steve laughing below, sharing his joy.

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Jonathan peers at Steve through his lens from afar, watching him relaxingly swing with a soft smile on his face as he sways back and forth and observes the trees towering above. His legs kick him back and then release and straighten to allow himself to swing forward, Jonathan snaps a shot the second the light hits just the right angle on his face.

The younger boy treads through the leaves and vines over to the hammock, taking the occasional photo of the gorgeous view around him. He gingerly sits down on the hammock, making sure the thinly chained fabric can withstand his weight before he leans back. He takes his camera strap off of his neck and settles the instrument on his lap before cushioning an arm behind his head. The lack of trees in the vicinity provided a bit of sky to look upon above, and though the bright blue was hidden the clouds that covered it were bright white and puffy as they soared by with the wind.

The air smelled a little more like sap this deep in the woods, as there were a few trees that seem to have been knocked down during a storm nearby. Their bark is scattered in bits all over the place, covered in the sticky, sweet smelling substance that nobody could deny loving. Jonathan takes in a deep inhale and sighs, finding a little more peace on this quiet summer day.

He startles just a little when a hand reaches over him and grabs his camera, but he quickly realizes it's Steve. Part of him wants to get angry, to demand it back before Steve somehow breaks it, but he restrains himself with a deep sigh. Steve wouldn't break his camera, he insists to himself, at least not on purpose.

"Be careful," He reminds him anyway, and Steve nods his head as

he looks through the lens and scans their surroundings with the camera held up to his face. He starts to walk around, and Jonathan's neck starts to hurt from the angle it's bent in to follow the sight of him so he just relaxes and stares up at the sky a little more. When a certain cloud moves the sun shines down on his face, so he closes his eyes and feels the warmth of it against his skin.

He forces himself to trust Steve, because that's what friendship is all about. Will trusts his friends, he cares about them, and he'd follow them anywhere. Jonathan wants to feel that, wants it to be genuine and not just some façade he puts on to seem normal. Once again, he thinks of himself as broken, his ability to trust is shattered for a reason he can't exactly pinpoint. Maybe it was his dad, maybe it was all the kids at school, maybe he was just less than human.

"We need to stop at my house before we go to your place for dinner," Steve says, breaking him from his thoughts and making Jonathan seek out his voice as he squints one eye open and finds Steve standing at the edge of the hammock with the camera cradled carefully in his hands.

"Yeah sure," He agrees easily, reaching out towards the Steve who hands back his camera without hesitation. The younger slips the strap over his neck again as Steve turns away to observe a few carved initials in the tree the hammock is strung up on, probably initials of young lovers who wanted to make their puppy love immortal somehow.

Jonathan takes a moment to struggle his way out of the hammock, which is far more difficult than getting on it. Steve takes pity on him and grabs his hand to help him up, and soon they're both walking back towards the bike. They walk down the path rather than ride, Steve guiding the bike between them as they stroll along quietly. He

wasn't sure if he was supposed to make conversation or not but he truly didn't have much on his mind to talk about, except maybe...

"Won't your friends be mad you're hanging around me?" He questions awkwardly, and Steve's responding silence makes him just that much more uncomfortable.

He hadn't meant to poke at a sore spot and it wasn't his intention to force Steve to choose some little freak from out of town over his friends. Jonathan's entire life had been an example of one of the saddest things he'd ever come to terms with, nobody would ever choose him first. It wasn't something someone talked about, but it was the way a person functioned. They had one main person they went to for things that they cared about the most; there could probably be an order of importance if there was enough scrutiny over it.

Joyce would never admit it, but Will was her favorite son, Jonathan knew it for a fact. Her eldest didn't have a lot in common with her, didn't share any of the same personality traits except for their chronic forgetfulness and the way they laughed. Will would most likely choose any of his buddies over Jonathan, or even their mother, Jonathan was lower on the list. Nobody at school liked him; nobody cared an excessive amount about him.

Sometimes Jonathan wondered if anyone would really notice if he just disappeared without a trace. And when he thinks about that he realizes that nobody really would outside of his mother and brother, nobody would notice a damn thing. Jonathan was a fly on the wall, and Steve would participate in this ongoing experiment that Jonathan called his life. He would be friends with Jonathan for now, but when it came down to it he'd make a choice.

"They can't control who I hang out with," Steve states quietly, his face an irritating blank canvas. Jonathan had a hard enough time reading emotions on people when they outwardly showed them; he got even more frustrated with purposely ambiguous facial expressions.

"If you don't please them, you won't have anyone to hang out with at all." Jonathan counters easily, his eyes scrolling along the ground and avoiding Steve entirely so he doesn't have to see his confusing face and most likely irritated expression.

"You shouldn't have to please people to have them be your friends." Steve says solemnly, and Jonathan blinks in surprise as he carefully steps over a root and shoves his hands into his pockets and hunches his shoulders. What would Steve know about that anyway? He had friends just like everyone else; it was obvious he'd done one thing or another to appease them at some point.

"Funny, that's not what I've observed over the past fifteen years." He can't help that his voice takes a bitter tone, a little angry and cynical as he clenches his teeth and sighs through his nose in agitation.

"You need better friends." The older boy offers, not acknowledging Jonathan's badly concealed anger and keeping his own voice neutral. "Besides, if Tommy wants to give me shit for hanging out with you then he can find someone else to mooch beer and cigarettes off of." He shrugs in the corner of Jonathan's eye, the younger turns his head to watch him carefully.

"You smoke?" He asks, a bit of a grimace on his face. Steve lets out a laugh and rolls his eyes, although not unkindly somehow. The tall boy turns his head to look at Jonathan, nodding with a small sheepish smile.

"Since I was fourteen," He replies, picking one of his hands off of the handlebars of the bike to wave it about. "I've heard all the lectures, I just can't help it." He murmurs, seeming rather shy to admit it, Jonathan had never seen him look like that before. "It calms me down, you know?"

"My mom smokes," Jonathan feels compelled to admit, and Steve nods his head, a lot of people smoked nowadays despite continuously surfacing proof that it wasn't good for you.

"Does your dad?" Steve questions with a curious lilt to his voice.

"I think so..." Jonathan shrugs, pulling his hands from his pockets to fidget with his camera. He didn't really like to talk about his dad that much, things were still rocky with him. "He used to, but I haven't seen him really since he left." He mumbles, frowning down at his camera lens.

"You and your brother live with your mom then." Steve says, it's less of a question than a statement, like he was putting puzzle pieces together. Jonathan can only nod; he thinks about his dad and tries to remember a time when he actually showed his eldest any affection.

"Yeah, i-it's... Nice, I guess." He sighs, unable to exactly express joy over the situation. His neglectful and oftentimes downright

abusive father was gone, but that didn't mean they were exactly thriving in his absence.

He was sure Steve could see that though, it was something the older boy had kept to himself luckily. Jonathan wore washed out ratty jeans and faded t-shirts, his jackets all had patches on them and it was obvious to anyone that his family wasn't the richest in the world by just looking at him. Steve himself wore tidy outfits without a hole or loose thread in them, even his slightly dirty sneakers looked almost new.

"Sometimes I wish my parents would split up," Steve says after a long moment of quiet, and Jonathan can't help but swivel his head to look at the older in surprise. He remembered as a child wishing his father dead, because he could never picture his mother leaving him. The idea of Lonnie dying made him feel sick sometimes, mostly because he wouldn't know how to feel about it. Lonnie was a shitty father, a shitty husband, a shitty person... It was hard to have that as a father.

"No you don't." He denies quietly, and Steve is the one to look at Jonathan with incredulity at his statement.

"Who crowned you a mind reader?" Steve demands, not angrily, but slightly puzzled and perhaps a bit annoyed.

"You just don't, all right? Everything's harder, even if live with the parent you like." He grumbles, and Steve huffs softly.

"Well I wish I had a parent I liked." The words, although delivered

casually, hit Jonathan right in the chest and make him swallow roughly. There was a difference between kids who were frustrated with their parents and kids who actually had to deal with their parents' unbelievable bullshit day in and out. Part of him wondered if Steve was just being dramatic or if they were more alike than Jonathan had originally thought.

"Well I like my mom when she doesn't think I'm crazy," Jonathan says rather boldly, he hadn't talked to anyone about this yet. He had never felt compelled to spill his secrets to anyone before, built walls up and blocked out everyone. But Steve was nice and it wasn't like he knew Jonathan's mother, it wasn't like he knew Will. Steve only knew Jonathan, and that for some reason made him feel a little more confident in expressing his true feelings.

"She doesn't think that," Steve laughs in disbelief, and Jonathan smiles awkwardly at the instant brush off but doesn't offer a counter argument. Steve might be able to understand shitty parents, might be able to preach to Jonathan about friends. But there was no way in hell that Steve Harrington could know what it was like to feel empty inside, even when he was at his happiest, even when things were okay.

They reach the edge of the woods where the road begins again, and Steve swings his leg over the bike to sit down. Jonathan drags his feet a little as he steps closer, Steve hums and moves the bike forward with a push of his legs before the younger can get on. Jonathan shoots him a glare as Steve smiles at him teasingly.

"I thought you were going to fall off the entire ride here, just get on the seat." He tells the other, and Jonathan watches him scoot forward on his seat. There was enough room for another person, Jonathan would be pressed between Steve and the back handle but

he could do it.

"You sure?" He asks hesitantly, he wasn't very sure of himself when it came to being so close to people he wasn't really well acquainted with.

"I wouldn't tell you to do it if I wasn't!" He sings, and Jonathan rolls his eyes before stepping forward and awkwardly slipping his leg up and over the seat. The bike is tall, the seat adjusted high for Steve's long legs, so Jonathan's toes barely brush the ground when he gets on. He sits down right behind Steve with a sigh, unsure where to put his hands. "Hands on my shoulders, feet off the ground." Steve tells him, and as soon as Jonathan places his hands down on Steve's slightly sweaty shoulders he pushes off.

The ride is a little less thrilling this way, but he feels a lot safer than when he was standing. Steve's back is sweaty and Jonathan's pretty sweaty himself so it's a little gross, but he didn't think either of them smelled too awful.

They ride back a different way, Steve's feet pedaling strongly and never slowing unless they were heading down a steep hill and could roll right down without any help. Jonathan wondered if he played any sports, because even though the younger was small, it couldn't be easy to pedal a bike with two people on it for this amount of time.

They speed through a nice neighborhood, the pavement is smooth and the ride is an easy glide so he feels confident in releasing Steve's shoulders and stretching his arms out on either side to feel the wind part around him. Steve turns the bike sharply and Jonathan makes a yelp of a noise before his arms automatically wrap around the older boy's waist just so he doesn't tumble off.

Steve takes his right foot off of the pedal and stops them in the front yard of a nice house. Jonathan stares up at it in a little bit of awe, it was bigger than his own, hell it was bigger than the Wheeler's house and they lived in a nice neighborhood. The grass is lush and green; a garden in the front is immaculate and blooming with a few colorful flowers. It's what Jonathan would call a dream home in the eyes of many.

"Are we gonna get off or are you going to hold onto me like a baby koala for a while?" Steve asks jokingly, and Jonathan lets go of his waist like it's on fire. His cheeks burn with embarrassment as he hops off of the bike but Steve doesn't say a word while he gets off the bike before strolling it up to the house. He sets the bike against the frame of the house and then they both approach the front door.

Jonathan is overcome with nerves in that second, were Steve's parents here? He didn't want to meet Steve's parents, especially when he was all sweaty and a little dirty. Jonathan turns his head to look back at the driveway, there was a car parked there. The older boy pulls out a ring with a couple of keys on it and fits it into the lock; Jonathan grabs his arm before he can step inside.

"Are your parents home?" He questions quietly, and Steve frowns at him.

"My mom, yeah." He nods his head, eyes scanning over Jonathan's face. "Dude, don't worry, she won't even look at me let alone acknowledge I have someone over." He snorts, stepping inside and pulling Jonathan in behind him.

Jonathan feels out of place in the pristine home, it's scrubbed spotless without a mark anywhere, and the décor is something out of a magazine. Steve toes out of his shoes and nudges Jonathan's shoulder with his elbow, signaling him to do the same. Steve takes their sneakers and sets them against the wall near the door, standing up and running his hand through his hair.

"Steven, is that you?" A woman's voice calls from somewhere in the house, Steve props his hands on his hips and rolls his eyes silently.

"Yeah, mom, it's me!" He says back, reaching over and grabbing Jonathan by the sleeve. He starts leading him up the stairs, but they both pause when a woman steps through one of the doorways leading into the foyer.

"Don't you have baseball practice today?" She's not looking at them, just like Steve had said, her eyes on a magazine poised in one hand, her nails finely manicured. Her other hand is propped on her hip, she looks like something out of a perfect family TV show. The woman's hair is neatly done up in a bun, a dark brown with a few graying streaks in it.

"It's Sunday, mom." Steve says as he leans against the banister, sounding slightly irritated.

"And?" She looks up then; her eyes are a piercing blue, nothing like her son's. Her eyes flicker over Jonathan for only a moment before returning to Steve.

"Baseball practice is only on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays." Steve elaborates impatiently, Jonathan fidgets where he's trapped in Steve's grip on his wrist.

"You look absolutely filthy," She tells him, instead of replying to his statement.

"It's just sweat," Steve argues, and the woman gives him quite the look.

"Take a shower, Steven." She instructs, and Steve makes a frustrated noise.

"Fine, okay, but I'm going over to my friend's house for dinner after." Steve says with a gesture of his hand, and then the woman's soul piercing eyes focus on Jonathan. She eyes him up and down for a moment with disinterest, possibly distaste.

"Does your mother let you run around looking like that?" She asks Jonathan bluntly, and he can feel his cheeks heating up in response.

"Mom!" Steve snaps, pulling Jonathan past him and giving him a small push. "Last door on the left, dude, wait for me." He tells the younger, who nods and hurries up the stairs as fast as he can without looking absolutely desperate to escape.

Jonathan gets to the top of the stairs and turns to face the hallway on the left, walking forward until he reaches the final door and

pushes it open hesitantly. The room is pretty clean, only a single shirt is on the floor near the hamper against the dresser. The walls are mostly bare, a deep blue color with only three posters hung about, all of them perfectly straight in alignment. Steve's bed is made up perfectly; his desk is empty other than a pencil and a notebook. He even has a coaster on both his bedside table and desk.

He immediately feels uncomfortable looking around the room, it was so neat and tidy, what teenaged boy was like this? Jonathan was almost a slob technically, his floor was piled with clothes at home and he stuck poster after poster and picture after picture everywhere on his walls. He had water rings on his dresser from glasses set down for long periods of time, his records and mixtapes were piled in one corner. He thought that was normal, because Will was pretty similar in messiness and so was their mother.

But he supposed not everyone was so careless, because it looked like Steve didn't want a single thing out of place. Maybe he had just recently cleaned it; Jonathan rationalizes, because who can keep their room this clean all the time?

"Sorry about that, my mom has a habit of scrutinizing everyone and everything she lays eyes on." Steve says as he enters the room, already taking off his shirt and walking over to the hamper. He picks up the shirt on the floor and puts it in the container with the other one, sidestepping to pull open his dresser.

"It's okay," It's all he can really say; mostly because he's distracted by the fact that Steve's clothes are perfectly folded in the dresser as well. He picks out a shirt, a pair of boxers, and then shuts the dresser. He crouches down to a lower drawer to pull out a pair of jeans. "Do you have a maid?" He blurts, and Steve glances back at him with a frown.

"No, wh-" He has the sudden look of realization on his face and tucks his clothes under his arm as he stands up straight. "Oh... Yeah, I know it's really weird, isn't it?" He gestures with his free hand around the room for emphasis before rubbing the back of his neck. "I never noticed until Tommy mentioned it a while back, my mom doesn't like things to be messy... I guess it rubbed off on me." He mutters distractedly as he opens the first drawer again, pulling out a pair of socks.

"I guess being really clean is better than being really dirty." Jonathan rationalizes, and Steve smiles a little, seeming to relax. He supposed he wasn't the only one that worried about being judged for his quirks.

"I guess so," Steve nods his head, hitching a thumb in the direction of the door behind him. "I'm gonna take a shower, but I'll be quick." He promises, and Jonathan nods his head while twisting his hands together a little awkwardly. "You can look through my records and play something if you want, but don't string them out all over the place i-it..." His voice trails off and he looks vaguely embarrassed again.

"I won't," Jonathan promises, and Steve gives him a relieved smile before turning and heading into what seemed to be the bathroom before shutting the door.

Jonathan steps over to the aforementioned records, sitting down and crossing his legs before starting to scan over the older boy's music selection. It ranged from decent stuff to downright awful, but there were a few albums in the collection that Jonathan enjoyed so he wasn't going to hold it against him.

Steve's shower takes a little longer than Jonathan had estimated, but he really doesn't mind. He feels a little sticky and gross himself, but he never minded things like that. They still had a little while before dinner; they could go back to his grandmother's house in a bit and take his own shower.

Steve returns from the shower with wet hair and a towel around his shoulders, holding his jeans in one hand and his socks in the other, dressed only in a shirt and boxers. His thighs looked rather pale in comparison to the rest of his body, it was a little funny honestly but Jonathan wasn't one to judge the way someone looked. One shouldn't cast stones if they live in a glass house or something like that.

"Sorry, sometimes I get carried away with my showers." Steve says, his skin is a little pink from the hot water and his partially dressed body seems not to faze him. Jonathan supposes he had no reason to be hiding his body; he was an attractive teenaged boy. Steve drops back onto his bed with a sigh and sets his jeans and socks beside him.

"It's fine," Jonathan says as he observes the album cover of a record, scratching at his face distractedly. "We should get back to my house," He explains, and Steve lets out a hum of a sigh before sitting up.

"Got it," He agrees, swinging his legs off of the bed and grabbing his jeans. "I really am sorry about what my mom said; she has this thing where if something isn't perfect she's going to bitch about it." He grumbles, leaned over as he pulls his jeans up his legs.

"Must be hard," Jonathan offers as he replaces the record back where he found it, standing up and crossing his arms.

"Yeah, my mom worries about appearance, but my dad worries about dignity and reputation." He huffs, shaking his head as he gets to his feet and shimmies his jeans up onto his hips. "He's been threatening to send me to military school since I was like eight." He laughs then; the noise isn't anything like his usual amusement, rather dry and bitter.

"Dads suck," Jonathan nods his head, stuffing his hands in his pockets when they keep twitching restlessly. He watches Steve's back as the older boy pulls his socks on, the back of his shirt is a little wet from having been put on before he was completely dry.

"Yeah, yeah they do." Steve agrees as he stands up, pulling his towel over his head and rubbing at his hair for a moment before throwing the towel into the hamper. "Let's go." He says with a nod of his head, running his hand through his still damp hair and walking out of the room.

Jonathan follows him down the stairs, and they get their shoes back on without another incident with Steve's mom. They head outside and Jonathan gets on the back of the bike once more, hands on Steve's shoulders and the toes of his sneakers barely brushing against the ground beneath them. Steve zooms through the neighborhood, back down the roads from which they had come towards Jonathan's grandmother's house.

Nana is outside watering a plant near the edge of the porch, her usual ponytail now accompanied by a pink headband. She looks like Joyce in that moment, eyes a little distant as if she were thinking

about something else and a small smile on her face.

"Hi, nana!" He calls as he slips off of the bike, watching Steve place it gently against the front wall of the house.

"Hello, angel!" She calls back with a bright smile, Jonathan jogs up the steps with Steve behind him. "How was your day?" She asks him as she reaches up to try and adjust his messy hair to no avail. It never parted correctly, never stayed in one place unless it was gelled down, and it never stayed out of his eyes. But he loved it, loved the way it covered his face and his already receding hairline...

"It was good; I had a lot of fun." He admits with a smirk back in Steve's direction, the young man looking rather smug at the confession. Jonathan wants to smack the expression off of his face, not in a rude way of course, he just wanted him to stop looking like that. Steve just looked too... Something... He looked too perfect; Jonathan didn't want to look at him anymore, so he glances away.

"Well that's fantastic, come on in, dinner should be ready soon." She sets the watering can down and ushers them inside. "Jonathan, please take a shower, you smell like a gym." She admonishes, with much less scorn than Steve's mother had with him, but all the insistence is still there somehow.

"Yes, nana!" He agrees, hurrying up the stairs with Steve at his heels.

They reach Jonathan's room and Steve is already slipping his shoes off and sinking back on Jonathan's unmade bed like it's second

nature, a pleased smile on his face. He turns over onto his side just as Jonathan turns to grab some clean clothes from his dresser.

"Is she your mom's mom or your dad's mom?" He inquires curiously, and Jonathan can't help but give an amused little huff of air through his nose at the question. The mere idea of nana being Lonnie's mother was hysterical in a way; she'd never raise a boy so rude and uncaring. Lonnie had always said that Joyce spoiled their sons, coddled them too much.

"My mom's mother," He answers as he unbuckles his belt, pulling it from its loops and placing it on the dresser. "I haven't seen my dad's mom since I was about twelve," He admits, shaking his head as he kicks off his shoes and knocks them out of the way. "She slapped my little brother across the face and I sat at the edge of the driveway with him for the rest of the afternoon until my mom came to get us." His mouth stretches into an awkward smile, something to put off the horrid truth he'd just spilled.

Steve doesn't look very surprised, his expression is calm and his eyes are still and focused on Jonathan, simply listening. Maybe they weren't so different after all; maybe Steve wasn't a stranger to being shown physical abuse. Perhaps if Jonathan hadn't been with Steve when they ran across his mother, he might have gotten a lick or two from her for being so smart. The idea makes Jonathan ache something awful, the slightly fuzzy memories of his father's bad deeds leaving a rancid taste in the back of his mouth.

The older boy doesn't offer any response, just turns his eyes slowly to the ceiling and sighs as he adjusts his head against Jonathan's pillow. His expression doesn't say much, but Jonathan can see the cogs turning in his head, a victim to his racing thoughts. He decides not to disturb Steve, turning and heading out of the room to take his

shower.

He spends a little longer than usual in the shower, standing with his head tilted down and the water beating down on the back of his head and neck. He hates that his emotions are hollowing out, as they always do after he experiences something he likes. It was almost as if forcing himself to have a good time resulted in digging him into a pit of not despair but emptiness, it was hard to describe the exact feeling. This feeling repeated itself so often, he was starting to think something was really wrong, something that needed to be fixed before it drove him insane.

Jonathan decides not to dwell on it, so he finishes showering and gets dressed again. When he returns to his room, Steve is still splayed out on his bed. It's weird how natural it feels for Jonathan to see him there, like he belongs there without argument. Steve looks over at him, offering him a soft smile.

"You seem like a good big brother." He says quietly, and the words sort of shock Jonathan, like dumping a bucket of water on his head. Was he still thinking about that? His brains feel all scrambled and the previous conversation is miles away from his current numbness, he runs his hand through his damp unkempt hair and sighs.

"I'm all right," The words earn a quiet laugh from Steve, and he smiles a little himself. The expression feels natural but the emotions don't connect, like his body is severed from his soul... This wasn't right, why couldn't he just be normal and happy with Steve?

"Someone needs to set the table!" Nana calls from downstairs, and Steve sits up in a flash. He looks excited, and Jonathan knew the feeling. Dinner at his grandmother's house never got old.

"Coming, Nana!" He hollers back, and Steve slips by him in his hurry to get downstairs. His chest brushes against Jonathan's, and before he can race down the stairs, he tussles Jonathan's hair. He watches the older boy go, feeling almost exhausted by both today's events and his current state of emotion. But after dinner Steve would go home, and Jonathan knew that he'd most definitely miss his presence so he might as well enjoy it while it lasts.

3. Trouble Comes A'Knockin

Dinner with Steve is a little stilted that night on Jonathan's end, more than once he's caught in his own little world. His grandmother seems to be a little concerned but Steve quickly takes note of it and changes the subject, pulling the attention onto himself instead. He can't quite find the energy to be grateful in that moment and can barely make eye contact with Steve when he observes him worriedly. Jonathan can only hear the noise of metal utensils on plates, his thoughts miles away as Steve chats idly with the older woman about something he can't quite bring himself to listen to.

After dinner, Jonathan and Steve clean the table as nana puts away. Jonathan expects that Steve will make an excuse to leave and bail as fast as possible, but when he's finished drying the plates he leans against the counter and watches Jonathan put them away.

"Did I do something?" He asks quietly, as nana was somewhere in the living room watching evening TV. Jonathan wipes a cold hand over his left eye and cheek, sighing as he looks over at his friend.

"N-No, of course not. I'm just tired." He excuses softly, and Steve nods his head slowly before jerking a thumb towards the door.

"I can go if you want." He offers easily, Jonathan wants to know how he just exudes energy and life without effort. Was it real or was it just a mask, like Jonathan put on so very often? It was frustrating not knowing exactly what someone was thinking, but he knew that if anyone else knew what he was thinking he would probably be locked away or get his ass kicked so maybe he was better off.

"No!" He says quickly once he recovers from the other's suggestion, and Steve blinks at him in surprise. "I-I... Sorry, I just... You don't have to go." He can feel his face heating up in shame; he knew he looked like an idiot, a desperate idiot at that.

"Well if you don't want me to then we can hang out in your room or something." He offers, reaching down the counter at the cookies that they had sworn they wouldn't eat until after they finished the dishes. Steve picks up a cookie, which looks small in his rather large hands, and bites into it.

"My room sounds good," He agrees quietly, and Steve picks up another cookie in his free hand to offer it to Jonathan. He takes it carefully, noting that Steve is watching him far too closely, so he takes a bite and turns away to walk out of the room.

They walk by nana, who offers them a distracted wave before going back to her TV show. They climb the stairs and head into Jonathan's room, Steve leaps onto Jonathan's bed once more. Jonathan edges into the room and sinks down onto the floor to reach under the bed, pulling out the old bucket of comics he used to read as a kid. Nana added to them all the time and every time he would come, there'd be a fresh comic or three to read, even now she hadn't disappointed.

"Cool, comics!" Steve leans over and picks one up to read.

Jonathan leans against the bed as he opens one himself. There's blissful quiet for a minute, and Jonathan just stares down at the first page to collect himself in the silence. He scans over the images, the bright colors and intense action, how could characters deal with so much when Jonathan struggled just to maintain a normal boring life?

"Dude, what am I, contagious?" Steve says suddenly, and Jonathan turns his head to find him tilting his head over the edge of the bed with an imploring look.

"N-No?" He murmurs, unsure of the answer the older boy is looking for.

"Get up here, I'm not going to bite you." He promises, adjusting a bit and patting the space he had created.

Jonathan slowly gets up and sits down on the edge of the bed, feeling stiff and uncomfortable, and they just sit there like that for another minute or so. Steve flipping through pages and Jonathan staring blankly down at his comic like some sort of loon until Steve sighs in complaint.

"Dude, you look like a puppet without a hand up its ass!" He says with humor, Steve sits up a little more and drops his comic into his lap. "What? You got a thing about touching people or something? Do you not want me on your bed?" He questions, and Jonathan shakes his head. He sort of wants to cry, but that's out of the question, so he just stares at the wall and tries to think of something to say.

"I just don't want to mess this up," He finally says, deciding on revealing one of the problems swirling in his head. It's easier for Steve to think he's weird rather than just a straight up head case.

"Mess what up? Me?" Steve asks with a frown, plucking at the fabric

of his shirt like he wasn't sure what the big deal was. Nobody ever did, it's what made Jonathan so strange. "I mean it'd be pretty hard to get rid of me, I kind of latch onto people. I'm clingy, so I'd be careful, because I'll show up at random and eat your food and talk to you until the sun goes down." He offers without missing a beat, and it makes Jonathan smile just a little.

"You already seem to be doing that," He says with a smirk, and Steve laughs, it makes Jonathan feel just a bit happy... It chases away some of the darkness in him, as cliché as that seems, it really does.

"Good point, so you're already stuck with me, Byers." Steve nudges him with his leg, then picks up his comic as Jonathan scoots back a little further on the mattress and pulls his legs up to sit more comfortably. He takes in a deep breath and focuses on the comic, feeling just a bit more at peace as he loses himself in the images.

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Jonathan steps up to the counter in the local ice cream shop, his anxiety soothed just a bit when the young woman standing across from him smiles brightly. He looks down at the flavors, but he knows Steve's because he had already told Jonathan what he wanted. He glances outside, where the boy is standing idly near the shop's window with a big goofy grin on his face. He was far too happy about winning a round of rock, paper, scissors, and sending Jonathan in here.

"Uh... I-I'd like two scoops of fudge ripple in a waffle cone, a-and... A cup with vanilla and chocolate swirl, please." He explains to the woman, who nods her head and gets to work fixing his order. He feels good that he didn't completely stammer his way through it, as

he usually did. Jonathan grabs some napkins and shoves them in his pocket, knowing that Steve will most likely need them considering he ate like a four year old with bad coordination.

He gives her the money, a combination of Steve's crisp dollar bills and Jonathan's crumpled ones. It's not that much though, just as Steve had said, even offered to give him money for both of their orders. Jonathan was sort of glad he was the one ordering, because Steve would have just paid for the both of them and given Jonathan his money back like he was some charity case.

"Thank you," He gives a small smile to the woman, taking the cone and the cup, before turning and heading outside. He pushes the door open with his hip and Steve is right there, taking the cone from him and licking a stripe up the ice cream.

"What'd you get?" Steve asks as they walk over to the shop window and sit down on the bench in front of it. Jonathan scoops up a spoonful of vanilla and chocolate and shows it to him as evidence before sticking it in his mouth. "How boring, but at least you didn't get just vanilla." He justifies it after a moment, as if afraid to offend Jonathan.

"I'm a boring person," Jonathan says with a shrug, and Steve nudges him with his shoulder as he gets fudge ripple all over his mouth like a child.

"You're not boring; I think you're the most interesting person in this town." He says with a quirk of his eyebrow, and then smirks smugly. "Other than me of course."

"You're an idiot," Jonathan smiles with a quiet chuckle, taking another spoon of ice cream into his mouth. Steve had spent every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday with Jonathan for the past two weeks. It was amazing, to say the least, to have someone just to spend time with for once that was his age.

"I'm not an idiot, I'm eccentric." Steve objects, puffing his chest out a little, the attempt at looking cool falls flat because of the ice cream on the corners of his mouth. Jonathan rolls his eyes and reaches into his pocket for the napkins, handing him one. "Thank you," He murmurs, quickly taking it and wiping at his face.

"What do we have here?" Jonathan feels the hair on the back of his neck stand up at the voice, the footsteps approaching, his instincts telling him to run and don't stop until he was totally safe. He had been chased through the woods by some boys in his school once; they'd caught him and hung him by his underwear on an old tree. Maybe he should start cutting his underwear so it tears easily, he would not want a repeat of that, it had taken an hour just to get down.

"Hey Tommy, Carol." Steve greets idly, licking at his ice cream again. The boy steps up to them, with one of the girls behind him, the redhead. The girl waves a little but makes a bit of a face at Jonathan, figures.

"Steve, it was one thing to save the little creep from going into a coma on the ground, it's another to have afternoon ice cream with him." Tommy snorts, and Jonathan just glares down at his cup and stirs it quietly.

"He's cool, Tommy." Steve says easily, reaching out and patting

Jonathan's shoulder.

"The little perv was spying on us, Steve." Carol insists, and Steve is quiet for a moment. Jonathan knew this would happen, he would remember that Jonathan was really the one at fault here and he'd never speak to him ever again. He was just some pervert, some freak...

"I-I should go," He goes to stand and makes a startled noise when Tommy slams a hand into his chest, knocking him back into his seat. He spills some of his ice cream onto his shirt, and there's a small ache in his back where it collided with the metal of the bench. Jonathan's too focused on how Tommy's hand is still pressed to his chest to think about the pain; it's big and plenty capable of doing damage that he is all too familiar with.

"Stay a while, freak." Tommy says, his tone low and deadly.

"Tommy, just go, okay?" Steve says, he scoots closer to Jonathan and rests a lazy forearm on his shoulder.

"I can't believe you're taking this little faggot's side!" Tommy snaps, outraged, his hand tightens into a fist in Jonathan's shirt. Steve reaches out and pushes his friend's hand away roughly, and Jonathan holds his breath as he glances up at Tommy through his bangs.

"His name is Jonathan," Steve's voice has taken a tone Jonathan's never heard before, quiet and serious, not kind in the slightest. The sound reminded him of a dog's growl, a warning noise, before someone gets bitten. "Carol, why don't you and Tommy go suck face

somewhere?" It's not a question, more of an instruction.

"C'mon, Tommy." Carol says quietly, taking the boy by the hand and tugging him off down the sidewalk.

Jonathan stares down at his ice cream, some of it staining his shirt and the rest slowly melting in his cup. Steve had just almost gotten into a fight with his friend over Jonathan? He couldn't quite believe it, but when he looks over at Steve, he's watching Tommy walk away... Not with regret, but with heat in his eyes and a scowl firmly on his face. They're both silent until Tommy and Carol are out of sight, and then Steve turns back to him.

"You okay?" The anger is gone, replaced with only concern and kindness, and Jonathan sort of feels like he's in some sort of fever dream. Steve hands him a napkin, and Jonathan sets his ice cream down on the bench seat beside him with shaking hands to wipe at the splash of ice cream on his chest.

"I'm sorry," He mumbles as he clenches the crumpled up napkin in his hand, and Steve shakes his head, licking at his melting ice cream.

"Nothing to be sorry for," He says quietly, no room for argument. "Don't let him touch you, all right? You ever run into him without me you can tell him that I said I'll kick his ass if he hurts you." He licks at his ice cream again, staring pensively across the street at nothing with unfocused eyes.

"He's your friend." Jonathan argues quietly, unsure as to where he should stand on this. He didn't want to lose Steve, but he also didn't

want him to throw everything away either.

"You're my friend, and if he can't deal then he can fuck off." He says, irritated and angry once more.

Jonathan picks up his ice cream and takes another spoonful to avoid saying anything else. It doesn't taste nearly as good as it did a minute ago. He didn't want to stand in between Steve and his friends; it didn't seem very fair of him. He was only here for the summer; if Steve chased away his friends for Jonathan then he wouldn't have anyone during the year...

"I don't feel so good..." Jonathan mutters, stirring his ice cream into a melting cup of liquid. "Maybe we should call it a day." He says weakly, and when he glances over at Steve, he's got that damn look on his face again. *He's worried about you*, his mind tells him insistently, and he really doesn't like that. When people worried about him it meant bad things, it meant dragging them into his problems that were beyond repairing.

"Are you sure? We could go to the woods, or... or to the library." He suggests quietly, and Jonathan shakes his head.

"I just want to go home," He says, and Steve nods before wrapping an arm easily around his shoulders. "I'm sorry," He says once more, feeling ashamed of the situation entirely.

"Stop apologizing, Byers." The older boy insists, and Jonathan falls quiet at the prompting. He wasn't sure what else to say, they were supposed to be having a fun afternoon and he felt like his presence

had ruined it.

"Do you want to stay for lunch?" Jonathan questions as they walk, and he feels more than a little dismayed when Steve shakes his head.

"I got to do some stuff for my mom around the house," He offers in explanation, which quells Jonathan's worries to a degree. "She's got problems, and if we don't cater to them she practically goes ape shit." He tells Jonathan quietly, seeming lost in his thoughts.

"Is that why your house is so clean?" Jonathan asks softly, and Steve nods with a quiet hum.

"We go through more bleach, laundry detergent, and cleaning supplies than any normal household." He says, seeming more embarrassed than anything else as the tips of his ears redden slightly. "But I'll come over later tonight after dinner maybe?" He suggests, and Jonathan shakes his head slowly.

"I dunno, nana goes to bed kinda early." He mutters, and Steve seems to be almost disappointed for a fraction of a second before grabbing Jonathan by the arm and shaking him a little.

"I could just climb the side of your house, or maybe we could meet down at the lake?" He offers with a small smile, and Jonathan takes a moment to think how absolutely terrible that might be. The idea of Steve climbing the side of the house and trying to reach Jonathan's window didn't pan out so great in his mind.

"The lake, I guess." He shrugs, and Steve bounces in excitement before patting Jonathan's shoulder.

"It's a plan then, meet me down at the lake at... Let's say midnight?" He steps in front of Jonathan to stop his casual steps, placing both hands on the younger boy's shoulder. Jonathan can't help but smile at the absolute joy on the other's face.

"How about eleven?" He barters, and Steve tilts his head back and forth with a small frown as he thinks it over before nodding in agreement.

"Eleven it is, Byers." He consents, and then holds out his hand in a fist that Jonathan flinches at, expecting some sort of hit. "Fist bump, dude." He says with a sigh, and Jonathan rolls his eyes before bumping his own hand awkwardly against the older teen's fist.

The lake at eleven it is.

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After dinner, Jonathan gets around to reading the letter that has come for him in the mail. He heads up to his room and tears open the letter from Will, his mother had already called him the other day just to check in after she got the letter.

She had been so delighted to learn that Jonathan had made a friend, asked him how he was and if he was having fun. He had given her

short answers, as he once mentioned, phone calls weren't really his thing. But his mother seemed content with Jonathan's progress, so she had let him hang up after a couple of minutes.

Will, though, always sent him letters from camp. Ever since he'd started going, that was how they communicated. It was kind of like their special thing, to talk to each other like they were on adventures worlds apart and had to keep each other up to date. In a way, he supposed they were now, looking down at Will's letter.

Dear Jonathan,

It's super cool that you met someone, I hope he's nice to you because you deserve a good friend. Camp is amazing as always, although Mike really doesn't like the spiders that get in the cabin so me and Lucas have to bring them outside all the time. Dustin and I have created the perfect s'more, I'll have to show you how to make it when I see you next! Make sure you take lots of pictures, I want to see some of you and Steve! I really hope you're feeling better, maybe you should visit nana's house more often if this summer really works out. Stay safe, and give nana a big hug for me!

Love, Will

P.S. - I am very jealous that I'm missing out on pie!

There's a little doodle of a wizard waving his wand around near the bottom, a common signature of Will's that Jonathan finds himself smiling fondly at. He's more than glad his brother is having fun at camp, and he seems at ease knowing that Jonathan is having a decent time himself.

He thinks about coming back to nana's for the next summer, maybe visiting during spring break if he could. He hated that he was already dreading going home, back to the kids at school that teased him and

pushed him around. He really didn't like that he was already starting to think about visiting Steve in the future, who knew how long it would be before the older boy forgot about him?

Hell, by next summer, Steve will be back with Tommy or some other kids... He'll forget all about the stupid little kid he was friends with for a couple of months.

Dear Will,

The perfect s'more you say? I'm both excited and scared to know what that entails. Anyways, Steve is a pretty nice guy so far. We've been hanging out a lot, it's almost like we're best friends. He threatened to beat a guy up today if he tried to hurt me, and I don't think I've ever had someone care this much about me outside of you and mom. He is really nice, and tonight we're hanging out down by the lake. If this friendship lasts I'll probably be more than willing to come back and visit next summer. I'll make sure to get a picture of him or two, just for reference, he's a little bigheaded and just between the two of us he really doesn't need the boost in ego. I think nana misses you, I know I do too... Anyways, tell the boys I think you're all nerds!

Love, Jonathan

Jonathan smiles to himself and folds up the piece of paper, sticking it in the new envelope and turning it over to write down the address and return address. He licks the stamp and sticks it on, and is about to seal the envelope when there's a sudden knock on his window.

He startles, turning his head and finding a dark shadowy figure with a familiar tall head of hair that makes him sigh in a mix of relief and annoyance. They had agreed on the lake at eleven, not his bedroom window at nine thirty. He drops his envelope down at the desk and

stands up, walking over to the window and pushing at the sill. It's a little stuck, so it takes a few seconds of intermitted pushing before it slides open begrudgingly.

"What happened to the lake at eleven?" He demands quietly as he steps back, allowing the lean but broad and gangly frame of the older boy squeezes through the window and almost falls onto the floor in his struggle.

"Sorry," Steve mutters, straightening out and looking down at Jonathan. His breath catches in his throat at the sight of Steve's face, his bottom lip is swollen and the skin is split and still attempting to scab and bleeding just a bit. "I didn't have anywhere else to go," He shrugs, crossing his arms uncomfortably and avoiding Jonathan's gaze.

"What happened?" Jonathan questions softly, feeling a pang of sympathy at the memory of the two occasions in his own life he had busted his lip open. It was pretty painful, hard to talk and hard to move your mouth in any way.

"I spilled a bucket of mop water on the kitchen floor, my mom wasn't too happy." Steve huffs, ducks his head a little and allows a few strands of his usually perfectly coifed hair to fall in his eyes. It looked more askew than it commonly was, like Steve had taken a shower and hadn't had time to gel it back into place.

"Your mom did that?" Jonathan says quietly, unsure as to what he's really asking. He knows what a father is capable of, knows how badly it hurts to be knocked to the ground and kicked so hard he's left wheezing and sobbing on the floor. But the idea of his mother doing such an act was baffling, but then again Steve's mother seemed

nothing like his own.

"It's not a big deal, I was just wondering if I could maybe stay here tonight..." Steve tells him hesitantly, and Jonathan blinks at him for a moment before turning away and stammering as he starts to gather his thoughts.

"O-Oh, um, ye-yeah sure." He nods jerkily, points over at Will's usual bed as casually as he can. "Two beds, no problem." He assures, and Steve seems to deflate with relief. He sinks down onto the second bed, hands dangling between slightly spread knees and eyes downcast on the carpet.

"Sorry to ruin our meet up," He apologizes with a sigh; Jonathan steps back over to his desk and clears his throat gently as he searches for something to say. He remembers their earlier conversation, pulls an important line from Steve's earlier dialogue.

"Nothing to be sorry for," He offers with a small smile, and Steve glances over at him, chuckling quietly with a half smirk. Jonathan drops back against his bed and sighs as he stares up at the ceiling, listening to the older boy as he stands up and starts to move around.

He hears papers rustling and he sits up on his elbows as his heart starts to race, finding Steve holding the envelope and the letter he'd written for Will. He's already read it, so there's no point in freaking out and trying to keep him away from it.

"Can't you keep your nose out of other people's things for five minutes?" He asks quietly, and Steve glances over at him, having the

decency to look guilty. He folds the paper up and slips it back in its envelope, setting it down on the desk and picking up Jonathan's camera.

"Sorry, I just..." He brings the camera up to his eye and surveys the room, snaps a photo in Jonathan's direction just after the younger turns his head away. "Hey, when are you going to develop your pictures? I'd love to see them." He informs Jonathan, walking over to the bed and sinking down next to him.

"When school starts back up, I use my school's dark room." He explains with a sigh, taking the camera and pulling a leg up on the bed to push himself back towards the headboard. He crosses his legs and settles his camera in his lap, fiddling with the lens and the scope.

"We have one of those at Riverton High," Steve mentions, and Jonathan nods his head in silence, not sure what else to say. Steve seemed off, like he was trying to keep up his usual happy energy but falling short. Just looking at him felt different, the way his shoulders slumped and he leaned his elbows against his thighs. His eyes were soft and distant, glimmering with a hidden melancholy that Jonathan painfully knew himself.

"Steve," He finally finds the courage to speak up, his voice weak to his own ears as he thinks of something to say that might comfort him. The older boy looks over at him, puffy lip on display but not taking away from his natural good looks. "Your mom's a bitch." He lets it escape his mouth before he can change his mind, and Steve's eyebrows rise in surprise, Jonathan expects him to storm out or maybe give him a matching busted lip.

He's shocked when a laugh bubbles from Steve's lips, genuine

laughter that Steve covers his mouth to quiet. Jonathan watches him for a careful moment, still wary of the reaction. Steve starts to nod, sitting up and leaning back a little with a small sigh. His demeanor changes just a little, shoulders loosening and straightening back to their usual posture.

"Yeah, yeah she is." He agrees, and then reaches over. He grabs Jonathan by the shirt and pulls him into a hug, wrapping his arms around Jonathan's shoulders and sighing against his shoulder. "You're a good kid, Byers." He murmurs, and Jonathan brings up gentle hands to settle them on Steve's back, smiling softly.

"You too, Steve." He promises, and Steve lets him go. The older boy stands up and walks over to the other bed, dropping down on it leisurely. Jonathan watches him for a moment before laying back on his own mattress, and they sit in companionable silence for a bit.

Left to his thoughts, Jonathan smiles to himself at the idea of returning back to Riverton for the next summer. Yeah, he definitely wanted to come back here as long as Steve would want him.

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Jonathan's mouth is stretched into a bright grin as he races through the tall weeds, just a few paces behind Steve. The older boy was so much faster than him; he had been informed that Steve was on the track team and the swim team. This honed athleticism mixed with Jonathan's legs being shorter than his meant he had to sprint his little heart out just to keep up.

"Beat you!" Steve proclaims as they skid to a halt at the tree they had ordained the finish line, Jonathan rolls his eyes and pushes at the older boy. "Don't be a bad sport, Byers!" Steve insists as he steps over to the edge of the lake and starts stripping off his shirt.

"W-What are you doing?" He asks, cheeks heating up as Steve kicks off his shoes and socks before unbuttoning his jeans. He was watching his best friend strip down at random, and quickly he realizes he shouldn't be looking. Jonathan stares down at his feet awkwardly, listening to Steve struggled to pull his jeans off.

"I'm going swimming! It's hot, dude!" Down to his underwear, he throws his jeans on a root of the tree and starts walking to the edge of the water. When the water reaches his calves, he turns back to face Jonathan and gestures his arms out wide before falling back into the water with a splash. "C'mon, get in!" He urges as he pushes himself deeper into the water in an easy stroke.

"Nah, I'm not really that hot." It was a lie of course, he was sweating through his t-shirt and his jeans were sticking to him pretty bad. But Steve was a handsome older guy and Jonathan was kind of skinny and awkwardly shaped, not to mention he really couldn't swim.

It wasn't that he couldn't swim at all, he could keep his head above water for a few minutes if need be but he had never really learned any proper technique. The only time he spent time at the public pool back in Hawkins was sitting in the shade and watching Will, because a few boys there would take his swim trunks in a second if they had the chance.

"Boo!" Steve splashes at him, but it doesn't reach him. "Get in, man! It's really nice, I promise." He dunks under the water and comes up

with his hair flattened down over his eyes. The sight makes Jonathan grin, and he covers his mouth to hide it from Steve when the older boy pushes his hair away from his face.

"I don't want to get all wet," He excuses lamely, and Steve seems to think the same thing because he gives Jonathan a look.

"Pretty please, Jonny? For me?" He asks, and Jonathan curses under his breath because Steve knew just how to get to him. Those puppy eyes and that pouty face, he could probably get Jonathan to jump off a bridge if he put a little quiver to his bottom lip.

"Fine!" He kicks off his shoes next to Steve's, smirking a little as Steve whoops and hollers behind him. Jonathan holds onto the trunk of the tree as he shimmies out of his jeans, grunting in frustration as they get stuck around his ankles. He eventually gets down in his underwear and looks around, the closest point of civilization was his grandmother's house but they weren't the only people that came around the lake. He walks into the water, wading deep until the water is up to his chest.

Steve swims circles around him, smiling and splashing water on Jonathan. He keeps his feet on the muddy floor of the lake, his breath hitching as he steps a little deeper on accident and has to stand on his toes. Steve swims further away from him, using his arms to create leisure strokes through the dark water, leaving ripples in his wake.

When he's far away enough, Jonathan lifts his feet up from the lake bottom and waves his hands in a pitiful mimicry of a windmill under the surface as he attempts to float. His mouth sinks under and he tips his head back, splashes a little and takes in a calming breath. He moves his arms and occasionally touches down on the floor to

stabilize himself, watches Steve every couple of seconds as he made his way towards the other side of the lake.

Jonathan focuses on letting himself float, his body stiff but managing to keep steady. He listens to Steve sing some Journey song across the water, waves his arms out to push his body through the water. He thinks about how fast the summer was passing him by, it was already late June and soon he would have to go home. He feels a pang of bitter sadness well in his chest, but it's pushed to the back of his mind when Steve suddenly surfaces next to him.

"Boo!" He smiles, bright and happy, Jonathan snorts and pushes at his face. "I'm really gonna miss you this year, you know." Steve informs him, sobering just a little with a small frown. It's strange for him to mention, almost like their minds were on a similar wavelength. Jonathan twists his arms and sits himself up, still floating but having to paddle just a little to keep him like that.

"Me too," He admits, reassured by Steve's honesty. He wishes that he could drag Steve back to Hawkins with him, mostly because it'd be nice to have him around, a little bit because all of his bullies would shit themselves with an older dude like Steve at his back. "I could come back next summer," He tells the other finally, and Steve lights up at that.

"Well of course you're coming back next summer, who am I gonna bother for three months?" He demands, jabs Jonathan in the side and makes him flail in the water with a laugh.

His feet stretch and he searches for the bottom of the lake, taking in a shuddering breath as his head threatens to sink under the water. Jonathan searches the surface of the water and realizes he let himself

drift out into the deeper side of the lake, and for a moment he wants to panic but he doesn't want to look like an idiot.

He paddles his arms and kicks his legs as rhythmically as possible, Steve drifts away from him just a little but doesn't stray far. If he could just reach the shallow end, he'd be just fine. He starts trying to imitate Steve, pushing his arms through the water in the direction of the shore. He can feel his heart racing as his mouth dips under the water for the thousandth time; he flails and pulls in a sharp gasp when his head tips back into the fresh air once more.

He's most definitely not making any progress, movements in the water like trying to push himself through what he imagines space might feel like. There's a disturbing feeling like he's tied down, no amount of movement is making a difference and he's nowhere close to the shore.

"Jonathan," He doesn't hear it at first, too busy trying to keep himself from sinking. "Jonny!" Arms slip behind him and he's turned away from the shore, thrashing just a bit before he realizes he's being pulled to the shore. "It's okay, I gotcha." He's practically lugged out of the water by the older boy, set in the dirt to catch his breath.

Jonathan feels immediately humiliated as he pulls his knees to his chest and squeezes his arms around them, still breathing heavy. He couldn't even take a nice swim with Steve without drowning, what sort of friend was he? He can feel Steve's hand on his back, but the older teen is sickeningly quiet.

"I'm sorry," He rasps after a moment, having caught his breath just a little bit.

"What happened, kid?" Steve asks quietly, and Jonathan shakes his head. He doesn't want to talk about it, doesn't want to admit anything other than it being a freak thing. "You started flailing around and freaking out." His hand moves up to squeeze Jonathan's shoulder, then up to his head to push back some stray hairs from his face.

"I told you I didn't want to go swimming," He mutters, earning responding quiet from the other boy.

"There's a difference between not wanting to and not knowing how," He sounds angry now, and Jonathan feels tears burning behind his eyelids. He knew he'd piss Steve off eventually, or that the older would grow bored of him, but not so soon. "You could have been hurt, Jonathan." He's pulled closer into Steve's side, and notes that it's not just him shaking.

"I wasn't going to go far," He offers as reassurance, Steve sighs at him and then ruffles his damp hair.

"I'll teach you how to swim, okay? And until then, if we go swimming, you stay near me." He explains, the arm around Jonathan's shoulders squeezes him close and the older chuckles uneasily. "You scared the shit out of me," He confesses, and Jonathan smiles shakily.

"Scared the shit out of myself," He says, and when he glances over at Steve, the other teen is smiling fondly.

"You're gonna be the death of me, Byers." He huffs; Jonathan runs his hand through his hair and gets to his feet to retrieve his clothes.

Steve follows behind him, and Jonathan avoids looking at him as he takes off his boxers to wring them out. Jonathan just slips his jeans on over his wet boxers, not having enough confidence to commit such an act. They redress, clothes growing damp from their still wet skin, and then as they start to walk towards the house Steve wraps an arm around his shoulders.

"I could get us the keys to the school dark room, you know." He offers after a few steps of quiet, when Jonathan looks over at him curiously, he grins. "I really want to see some of the skilled photos you've been taking." He says with a shake of Jonathan's shoulder, and the younger blushes under the praise.

"You won't get in trouble?" He asks, and Steve's face does a funny thing where it scrunches up and he looks personally offended for even suggesting something of the sort.

"I am the king of sneaking around, Jonathan, I am a ninja." He swears, pulling a laugh from the younger.

"You're an idiot," He smiles, and Steve shrugs his shoulders before reaching over and tugging a lock of Jonathan's hair. The smaller teen reaches out and shoves at Steve in retaliation, who laughs loudly before taking off through the tall weeds in a playful jog. "I'm not running after you!" He warns, and Steve slows slightly but continues walking backwards so he can look at Jonathan.

"But we need to hurry because nana promised ice cream sandwiches after lunch!" He insists, and Jonathan rolls his eyes before speeding up just a little to catch up with the older boy.

"Be honest, you're using me to get to nana." He jokes, and Steve punches him lightly in the shoulder. Jonathan rubs at his arm a little; even a small hit was painful when Steve had such bony fists.

"Definitely," He agrees with a smile, and Jonathan jabs him in the side for his quip and then ducks away to avoid a swipe from Steve's long arms. They end up jogging through the grass, bickering lightly and laughing as they grow near the house. Something about it feels like home, even though Will and his mother are miles away.

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Jonathan gets a call just two days after Will's return home from camp, his nana handing him the phone and slipping the bowl of cake batter from his hands in a quick and fluid motion. Jonathan licks a bit of stray batter off his thumb and presses the phone to his ear, stepping away from the counter.

"Hello?" He murmurs, walking over to the kitchen table and sinking down in a chair.

"We're coming over today!" Will's excited voice greets him, and Jonathan's eyes widen as he smiles just a little. "Mom said I can stay with you and nana for the rest of the summer if I want." He informs Jonathan without even letting the older boy respond, knowing that his brother wouldn't have much to say anyway.

"Almost two months without your friends?" He asks teasingly, and Will makes a strangled noise before sighing.

"All right, maybe for just a week or two." He relents, and Jonathan smirks as he watches his grandmother start to pour the batter into a pan. "Mom is gonna come over for the weekend too, we want to meet Steve." He confesses with a quiet laugh, Jonathan covers his face with his hand and leans back against the table with an embarrassed groan.

"You guys are so nosy," He mumbles, and then smiles. He was doing that a lot more lately, even though he still frequently had his bad days, his good days were just a little brighter with Steve. "Steve is going to love you, he's nosy too." He snorts.

"I'm almost finished packing, but I'll see you in a few hours." He promises, and Jonathan nods his head even though he knows Will can't see him.

"All right, we'll be here." He agrees, and Will gives a happy goodbye before hanging up. "Mom and Will are coming over for the weekend." He tells nana, who brings him a beater from the mixer covered in cake batter. He takes it and drags his tongue along the metal spindles, enjoying the chocolate taste that was so very different from that of the actual cake.

"That's great!" She grins, licking from her own beater as she sits down across from Jonathan. "It's so nice to have family around." She says to him, and Jonathan nods his head. He thinks back to the previous conversation he'd had with Steve that day they went swimming in the lake and frowns quietly as he licks his lips for any chocolate residue.

"Do you think I could come back for next summer?" He questions, and the woman practically lights up.

"Oh yes, I would like that very much. I'm so glad you're having a nice time." She reaches out and pats his hand, resting her own atop his with a content sigh.

"One of the best summers ever." He swears, and her grin broadens before she slips out of her chair to return over to the counter and check the oven.

He thinks of Steve, who wouldn't be out of baseball practice until four. He would probably be knocking on the door by five, ready to take Jonathan out into the woods or down into town for some ice cream. For a split second, he worries about the idea of Steve not getting along with his mom and brother, but then quickly dismisses it. Steve was such a friendly guy, it was practically impossible not to like him.

As nana handles the cake, Jonathan heads upstairs to busy himself with fixing up their shared room. He had thrown some of his clothes onto Will's bed, which was still messy from Steve sleeping over that one night. He frowns to himself as he thinks back to that night, Steve's lip had healed up pretty quickly and at nana's inquiry he had claimed he'd been hit in the face during practice by a stray ball. Jonathan hadn't offered any argument, it was Steve's business, he knew the feeling of having to lie about a parent laying hands on him.

Ten minutes before five Jonathan heads down the stairs towards the front door when he hears the car pull up, a smile on his face as he

opens the screen door and watches Will tear out of the car with buzzing excitement. The boy beats him to the stairs, leaping up onto the porch and throwing himself into Jonathan to hug him tightly.

"Whoa!" Jonathan laughs, placing a hand on his brother's back and ruffling his hair. "Hey." He lets the boy slip away so they can look at each other properly.

"I didn't know you could get tan!" He points up at Jonathan with an amused grin, the older boy blushes just a little and distractedly pushes his hair behind his ear. He wasn't that tan, just a little darkening of his skin on his arms and cheeks really.

"Hi honey!" His mother greets him, stepping up onto the porch and pulling him into a tight hug. He rests his head against hers and sighs quietly, they were still a little off since everything happened but he knew his mom would always love him.

"Nana made cake, c'mon in." He snags his little brother's shirt collar and tugs at it playfully, the younger boy batting at his hands with a smile and quickly follows with their mother in tow.

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"Is Steve joining us for dinner?" Nana questions as they sit in the living room, Will had been excitedly chattering about the happenings at camp for a little bit but then they had fallen into a subtle quiet.

"Yeah, invite him over!" Will insists as he leans forward in his seat, his gentle happy energy brought a bit of peace to Jonathan.

"I don't know his number, but he usually comes over after baseball practice." He admits, glancing at the clock. He frowns just a little, noting it to be almost six o'clock. Steve was normally punctual, and if he couldn't stay he would always drop by a little after five and explain himself before promising to meet up another time.

"I'm sure he's just busy," Nana waves him off, and Jonathan nods his head quietly.

"Yeah," He mumbles, but it doesn't take away from the unease in his stomach. He shouldn't be this concerned over Steve's whereabouts, but he had never really had a friend before so maybe he was supposed to be a little bit worried?

They go back to talking, Will fills the quiet easily, he was always very talkative around them. He smiles and chatters, explains in detail what they did at summer camp. Jonathan finds himself staring at the clock, drifting between the slowly moving hand of the clock and the door. It's a few minutes after six when there's a knock at the door, Jonathan springs from his seat and races up to the door.

He flings the door open, finding Steve before him in his usual jeans and t-shirt. He falters a little when he notes that there's a small bruise on his left cheekbone, and when his eyes trail down for any other injuries he finds some gauze wrapped around the young man's knuckles. It's obvious to put together, Steve had been in a fight of some sorts.

"Hey Jonny boy!" Steve grins at him, like there's nothing out of place. "I saw the car outside, is this not a good time?" He questions, his smile slowly slipping from his face as he observes Jonathan's blank face.

"No, c'mon in. My mom and brother are here." He admits, and Steve simply nods before waiting for Jonathan to step out of the way so he can come inside. He distantly wonders how Steve can be so cool with meeting new strange people, it was admirable to be honest.

"This must be Steve!" Joyce says, not even bothering to feign ignorance as she stands up. They step up to one another and Steve is suddenly shaking her hand. "I'm Joyce, it's very nice to meet you." She smiles brightly, and Steve returns the kindness.

"You as well, your eldest is a pretty cool dude." He says with an easy nod, Joyce somehow manages to smile brighter, a giddy laugh escaping her. She seems almost in tears, and then she's hugging Steve. Jonathan groans quietly and ducks his face into his hands, embarrassment flooding through him. If he hadn't scared Steve off yet, she sure as hell would.

"Hi, I'm Will." Will greets, leaning up from his seat on the couch to shake Steve's hand. "What happened to your hand?"He questions immediately, also not one for subtlety. Steve holds up his gauze covered hand and seems almost uncomfortable for a moment, he smiles awkwardly.

"I got into a fight," He admits, and Jonathan feels his jaw clench.

"With Tommy?" He can't help but blurt, before anyone else can say something. Steve turns to look at him, he gets that soft little pitiful look in his eyes, the younger is already shaking his head.

"It just happened." He insists, and Jonathan huffs.

"You just happened to punch him in the face." He snaps, and Steve has the gall to look irritated with Jonathan!

"I'm not just going to stand there and do nothing." He argues, and Jonathan waves his hands erratically.

"Do nothing about what, listen to him rag on you for hanging out with me?" He laughs bitterly, he didn't want this friendship anymore if it meant Steve was going to throw himself down in the line of fire for him. This bullshit didn't matter, he didn't care anymore.

"You know, I thought you were a nice kid but it turns out you're a prick just like everyone else." Steve snaps, turning and storming out of the house. Jonathan deflates, feeling like Steve had just found a soft spot in his armor and jabbed a red-hot poker through it.

He glances back at his family as the screen door rattles against the frame as it falls closed. Everyone is deathly silent, staring at him, and looking rather sad. It felt like pity, and Jonathan hated pity.

"I have to go," He says quietly, and then heads out the door.

He can see Steve riding off on his bike, already almost at the street, Jonathan sighs and runs a hand through his hair. He feels like a major dick, Steve had seemed really upset, maybe he was assuming things he shouldn't assume. He starts walking, hopefully Steve is headed to the woods instead of his house because his house was much farther away and Jonathan didn't quite remember the way there.

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Jonathan's tired and sweaty when he reaches the pathway to the woods, he can see tire tracks in the dirt but those could be old so he won't be sure until he gets there. He starts walking once again, feeling a little irritated that Steve couldn't just talk to him. He winds his way through the trees and eventually gets to the clearing that they had visited a few times now.

He spots Steve's bike and breathes an instinctual sigh of relief. It lies haphazardly in the leaves, as if thrown to the side the second he'd gotten off of it, not a single moment of thought gone into caring for its wellbeing. Jonathan peers around for a moment, eyes falling on the hammock which now sags under the weight of a person.

He starts wading through the tall foliage, the noise announcing his presence but gaining no response from the person resting not a few feet away. Jonathan shuffles his feet awkwardly when he reaches the hammock, staring down at Steve quietly. The older boy's eyes are closed, and the sunlight shining down in small specks through the canopy highlights the bruise on his cheek.

"I'm sorry I yelled at you," He apologizes quietly, clasping his hands in front of him and feeling like a scolded child.

"I know better than to start a fight over a few insults," Steve mutters, instead of forgiving him or acknowledging his words.

"Did your mom hit you again?" Jonathan whispers, a pit of concern building slowly in his stomach.

"No, it was Tommy..." He blinks open soft eyes, shining a little with tears. Jonathan lifts his leg up hesitantly and Steve shifts in the hammock to accommodate him, the younger climbs up into the hammock and lays down shoulder to shoulder with his friend.

"What'd he do?" He asks quietly, staring at the side of Steve's face while the elder gazed up at the trees above them.

"My mom's having an affair with a guy that lives down the road from our house." He confesses, and Jonathan's eyes widen as Steve shifts uncomfortably. "Everyone in town knows my parents haven't had a stable marriage for a while, my dad's had four secretaries in the past three years because he keeps sleeping with them."

Jonathan can't quite comprehend the idea, he knows what it's like to have parents fight with each other and for bad things to happen but the idea of them growing apart and ignoring it all together was baffling.

"Your mom knows?" He inquires softly, just to make sure, and Steve nods his head.

"I told her, they're trying to make it seem like we're a perfect family." His voice wavers a little with anger, and he swallows as he falls quiet. They sit in silence for a few seconds, Jonathan places a careful arm over Steve's chest in an attempt to comfort him. "It's bullshit, it's all bullshit. Everyone knows, and everyone's talking about it. The entire team was staring at me all day at practice, I just swung at the first person that said something to my face." He mutters.

"Something else will happen and everyone will forget about it." Jonathan offers, and Steve turns his head to look him in the eyes, their noses centimeters from touching.

"Think so?" He asks, and Jonathan nods slowly.

"I'll take a while, but they'll forget. When I was ten I was the kid whose dad sent him to the hospital, everyone was over it in a few months." He admits in return, Steve doesn't flinch or gape, just stares.

"There's a special place for people like him," The older boy finally says after an intense period of just looking at each other, and Jonathan blinks, confused. "It's hell." He turns his head and moves his arm out from between them, tugging Jonathan closer and wrapping his arm around him.

Jonathan settles his cheek on Steve's chest, unsure of what to say. He

thought about death quite often, and in doing so he thought about life after death, if there was one at all. He thinks about dying and in doing so leaving Steve behind, and decides in that moment he has one more reason not to die. He curls his hand between the hammock and Steve's back, the older boy rubs his side gently. He wasn't sure if this was a normal thing that friends did, but he wasn't about to object to a moment they both seemed to be enjoying.

"Promise after I leave, you'll write to me..." He says after another lapse of silence, Jonathan can feel the hum vibrating Steve's chest underneath his cheek.

"Of course," He agrees in a murmur, and Jonathan believes him. "Think your family hates me now for causing a scene?" He asks with a small smile, but Jonathan can hear the real insecurity in it.

"Nah, I've made bigger ones." He says, drawing a chuckle from the older boy. "But I should get back, you want to come with me?" He doesn't want to move, it's strange how safe Steve makes him feel, different from the comfortableness of his family but similar in a way.

"Yeah, sure." They both pull apart and Jonathan slips out of the hammock before helping Steve up, they shuffle through the leaves over towards the bike.

Jonathan isn't sure whether to climb on the pegs or the back of the seat, but Steve answers this silent dilemma for him by scooting forward and looking over to him. He swings his leg over and wraps his arms around the other teen's waist automatically, and for a moment he realizes that Steve had once told him to hold onto his shoulders and winces.

"Hi ho, Silver!" Steve calls, and pushes off, not saying a word. Jonathan doesn't move his arms, and he decides not to mention it either.

4. The End of an Era

After returning to the house, Steve makes a much better impression on Joyce and Will. While a little hesitant at first, Jonathan's little brother quickly warmed up to the teen and laughed at practically every joke he made. Joyce was careful as well but soon she seemed to see that Steve was a nice guy, and was then easily able to converse with him. Steve looked right in his element, talking and smiling, not a hint of tension from the earlier discussion they had.

Jonathan realizes then that not everyone deals with problems by hiding away and staying quiet, some of them wiped away any evidence of it and acted like nothing had happened in the first place. Steve ignored his problems, he pushed them away and hid them all with a smile on his face. Jonathan found himself worried about leaving Steve rather than worried about himself being without him.

They go into town after lunch and get ice cream, and Jonathan spots Tommy walking across the street when they exit the shop. The young man has quite the shiner, and a butterfly bandage on his forehead where they skin had been split. The older boy makes eye contact with Jonathan, eyes hard and angry, Jonathan glances down at his ice cream and promptly knocks into Steve.

"Careful, kid." Steve snorts, ruffling his hair and then looking across the street. He only takes a quick glance before his expression changes into something a little more neutral, he wraps an arm around Jonathan's shoulder and squeezes him close to his side in a quick embrace. Jonathan watches Steve lick his ice cream, and after he swipes his opposite hand over his mouth, he speaks. "Remember what I said, Jonny, I'll kick his ass."

Jonathan nods his head, and then turns as Will, his mother, and his nana step outside with their own treats. Will bounces over to them, a cone of chocolate chip ice cream in his hand. Jonathan reaches out a hand and squeezes the back of his neck, the boy smiles up at him before licking his cone.

“Chocolate chip, huh?” Steve says, and Will nods his head. “That’s cool, your brother always gets just chocolate and vanilla.” He says, snottily like, and Will snickers at Jonathan rolls his eyes.

“My mom gets that too,” Will offers, and Joyce holds up her own cup as proof of agreement.

“Nothing wrong with the classics,” Steve quickly says, raising his hand up in surrender, the others laugh.

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On the last day of Joyce’s visit, when she has to return home for work, she catches Jonathan alone while Will is out back in the garden with their nana. Her eldest glances up from his comic book, frowning a little as he watches his mother close the door. He sits up as she approaches, Joyce sinks down on the edge of the mattress and places her hand on his knee.

He’s not one for starting conversations, so he just stares at her until she speaks.

“I just wanted to know how you’re feeling.” She admits, and Jonathan feels his cheeks heat up in embarrassment, he didn’t think they’d talk about this again… Well, he had at least hoped they wouldn’t.

“Fine,” He says quietly, and she sighs, obviously not pleased with the answer.

“This summer has been fun, right?” She inquires, he nods his head. “And you and Steve are getting along well?” She gestures a hand gently at him, he nods once more. “Will says you want to come back next year,” She explains, and he shifts a little.

“I do,” He admits, and she smiles just a little.

“That’s good, are you and Steve going to stay in touch?” She asks, Jonathan peers over at the folded-up piece of paper on his desk and reaches for it. He holds it out to her and she unfolds it, Jonathan watches her read the small note written on it that he had memorized since he’d received it the day after his fight with Steve.

Steve ‘Playboy’ Harrington’s address. Make sure you write me because I need constant attention.

Joyce smiles, and Jonathan feels the urge to roll his eyes when she looks at him with a sheen of tears in her gaze. She hands him back the paper and he folds it up, placing it back on his bedside table. He startles a little when his mom suddenly leans forward and pulls him into a hug, he places gentle hands against her back as she squeezes him tight.

“I’m just so glad you’ve made a friend,” She whispers, and he nods his head as she leans away, taking his hands into her own.

“Me too.” He agrees quietly, and then she’s up and stepping towards the door. “Hey mom?” He says suddenly, she pauses with her hand on the door and glances back. “I love you,” He confesses, and she’s hurrying back to hug him again. He didn’t say it quite as often as he should, but meeting Steve made him thankful to have at least one parent who gave a shit.

“I love you too, sweetheart.” She says sincerely, like a promise.

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Jonathan startles awake at the feeling of a hand shaking his shoulder, blinks open his eyes and finds Steve crouched next to his mattress. He takes in a surprised breath and Steve grins at him, Jonathan sits up and finds his lamp on and Will sitting up in his own bed with a grin.

“I let him in,” Will tells him, appearing sleepy but amused.

“Your brother’s a good sport, Byers.” He smiles brightly, and Jonathan snorts as he rubs his tired eyes. “Come on, do you want to develop your pictures or not?” He asks, and Jonathan frowns at him before turning his eyes to the clock.

1:57 AM

He sort of wants to hit Steve for coming around so late, but at the same time he's curious. The older boy pulls on his arm and Jonathan slips out of bed, quickly pulling on the jeans he'd thrown to the floor. He slips on a shirt and grabs his jacket off the dresser, Will is already lying down and facing away from them.

Jonathan quickly goes over to his desk and digs through, grabbing the two rolls of film he had filled since his arrival at his grandmother's house. He shoves the rolls in his pocket, and then grabs his camera just in case before heading over near his little brother's bed.

"Will?" Jonathan murmurs, and the boy waves a hand at him without looking back.

"Not a word, you owe me." He says, snuggling down under his blankets and falling still once more.

Jonathan follows Steve to the window and they climb over the sill and onto the roof shingles outside. He takes a tight grip on Steve's sleeve as they shuffle towards the edge of the roof. Steve kneels down and swings his leg over, leaning himself down and clinging to the gutter as he finds the footing of something below.

Jonathan gets down on his knees and carefully leans over to watch Steve climb down the edge of the gutter and the panels of the house. He slips to the ground and then steps back, gesturing Jonathan down, who nervously turns around and starts his descent shakily.

“One at a time, go slow.” Steve hisses at him, he settles one foot and another carefully in the best places possible as he slowly latches onto the gutter pipe, shimmying down. “I gotcha.” Hands grab around his waist and lowers him the rest of the way down, he adjusts his shirt as Steve lets go of him.

“Where are we going?” He whispers as they walk through the dew damp grass over to Steve’s bike, the older boy gives him a mischievous grin that tells him he won’t get a straight answer. He hops on the bike behind Steve and holds tight to him as they speed down the dirt road with the cool night air rushing past them. He’s tired and the wind whips at his face and chilling his skin, he tucks his face behind Steve’s back and clutches tight in an attempt to keep himself from the worst of it. Steve’s jacket is a little rough but it’s warm against his cheek, smells like his cologne which had started to permeate into some of Jonathan’s things because of how much of it the older boy sprayed on him. Then again, maybe it was a testament to how much him and Jonathan were together, that his scent was rubbing off on him.

They’re pulling up to what appears to be the local high school by the large white letters painted on the brick of the building. Jonathan slips off of the bike, feeling cold and just slightly irritated at Steve, but also intrigued. He watches Steve set his bike against the building before pulling out a chain of keys, walking up to the front doors.

“Where’d you get those?” He asks curiously, and Steve gives him another mischievous but still insanely annoying smirk.

“I have connections, Jonny.” He says quietly, tugging the metal door open with a loud creak that breaks up the peaceful quiet night air.

They shuffle into the hallway, most would be unsettled by the sight of empty hallways but Jonathan was used to wandering the halls after class in his own school.

Steve leads him through the corridors until they reach a familiar looking door. A rush of anxiety flows through him suddenly at the prospect of Steve standing over his shoulder watching him develop his photos. He spends a few seconds watching the older teen search for the right key, and then they're slipping inside.

"Jeez it smells in here," Steve mutters, and Jonathan simply smiles.

He gets to work, pulling out his film and observing the supplies available. It's methodical, familiar, and soon he loses himself to it. Pouring chemicals, flicking switches, hands gentle and cautious in their movements. The only thing Jonathan is aware of outside of his focus, is Steve standing nearby and hovering. On many occasions, Jonathan is rather agitated whilst being watched, but Steve is once more an exception to his norms.

"Hey, that's me!" Steve points to one of the pictures he's hung up to dry, the image clear and visible even in the dim light of the room.

Jonathan follows his eyes to the picture, one of Steve laid out on Jonathan's bed reading a comic book. He remembers the day vaguely, of the way the light had hit Steve's perfectly coifed hair and highlighted his cheekbones. Steve was a perfect subject for photography, as it seemed that even his most unflattering angles (not that he had many at all in the first place) had their own special beauty.

Jonathan examines the next piece of the film under magnification, frowning down at what he sees. It's an old roll, one he was halfway through with when he had come to Riverton. He takes a moment to look back at Steve, who is still admiring the already developed photos. He worries his camera strap between his fingers, bites his lip, and shoves the rest of the roll in his pocket.

"Take those down, they're ready." He murmurs, and then catches Steve's wrist before it can grab the photos. "Be careful, edges only." Jonathan instructs, the older boy nods seriously before taking hold of the clothespin and pulling one of the pictures down.

It takes a long time, but he makes it halfway through the second roll. Steve eventually starts to grow restless, keeping blissfully quiet, and Jonathan is beginning to tire once more. He washes his hands in the sink across the room as Steve gathers up the rest of the photos, and they lock the door before leaving. Jonathan keeps the photos in a folder he had found in the developing room, tucked in his jacket as they ride back to his house.

Steve gets off his bike and stands awkwardly opposite of him, dark circles starting to form under his eyes but a sort of content expression on his face. Jonathan pulls the folder out from under his shirt, staring at it for a moment.

"Thank you," He manages eventually, and Steve smiles, pleased.

"It was fun, like a stealth mission." He offers in reply, and Jonathan huffs a quiet laugh. Steve's smile quickly morphs into a jaw cracking yawn, and Jonathan checks his watch.

3:46 AM

“Do you want to stay here for the night?” He finds himself blurting suddenly, and Steve looks at him like he’s grown two heads. “Y-You don’t have to, but it’s really late.” He explains himself awkwardly, shifting anxiously and scratching at his forehead.

“That extra bed isn’t empty anymore, Byers. Are you kindly offering a space in your bed to a simple man such as I?” Steve questions teasingly, Jonathan scoffs and pushes at his shoulder.

“Shut up before I change my mind.” He turns on his heel and walks over to the drain pipe, grabbing onto the crook of the wall panel next to it and lifting his foot onto the exposed metal bolt of the gutter to lift himself.

He yelps when his legs are grabbed and his feet are pried off the drain, gripping at the metal pipe as Steve lifts him a little higher than he could reach. The younger presses his feet down on the higher foothold now available, and only has to climb a little ways before he can grip onto the gutter and scramble onto the roof.

Jonathan turns around on the shingles of the porch roof, leaning over to pull at Steve’s hoodie when he’s in reach. Soon they’re climbing back into the room, attempting to remain quiet as to not wake up the smaller boy in the room. Jonathan drops down the folder of pictures on his bedside table, tugging off his jacket and kicking his shoes off. He sets his camera and the rolls of film down on his dresser once more.

Steve closes the window rather loudly and they both fall still, waiting

with baited breath to see if it would wake Will. The younger Byers does not stir, and they both sag with relief, Jonathan unbuttons his jeans and then pauses when he notes that Steve is still staring at him.

“I-Is this okay?” He asks, and Steve seems to shake himself from his stupor.

“O-Oh, yeah, yeah!” He whispers, quickly shedding out of his own hoodie.

Jonathan occupies himself with the folder of photos while Steve undresses, sitting on the edge of the bed and flipping through pictures. He spots one of the pictures he hesitated in developing, one of himself that Steve had taken. He didn’t want to hurt Steve’s feelings and avoid developing his pictures just because they were snapshots of Jonathan. Although it was strange, to see his face after so long of trying to steer clear of it. The somber expression, the distant look in his eyes, a quiet moment caught by the older boy when he was thinking.

“Ready?” Steve slides under the blankets next to him, and Jonathan clears his throat quietly and nods his head. The older boy takes the pictures from him without hesitation, and Jonathan slips under the covers as well before dropping back against his pillow.

He watches Steve carefully, the teen’s eyes raptured with the photographs as he scans over every inch of every frame. His reactions were far better than the pictures themselves, he observes as Steve’s face lights up and is intrigued as to which picture caused such an expression. A picture of Jonathan, of the younger seated on his bed and curled up in a ball. It was a little blurry, not to mention awkwardly angled, but it was Steve’s picture so he supposed he

couldn't judge it harshly considering he wasn't much of a photography expert.

"I'm not that good at photography, huh?" Steve murmurs under his breath, but still seemed happy nonetheless to take in the easy afternoon light shining down on one side of Jonathan's body.

"It takes practice," Jonathan replies softly, turning on his side and shutting his eyes. He listens to the quiet and soothing noise of Steve picking up the top picture in the pile and slipping it behind the others as he observes them.

"Jonny," Steve's voice is almost inaudible, he hums sleepily, already dozing. "I want to keep this one, can I?" He asks hesitantly, and Jonathan makes another hum of a noise before burying his face further into his pillow.

Steve is quiet for a few blissful seconds, and Jonathan feels himself slipping into unconsciousness a little more easily now. He surfaces just a bit when Steve shifts on the mattress, thinks that maybe he imagines the gentle hand adjusting his bangs and the finger that brushes his cheek for a fraction of a second.

"Night, Jonathan." Steve whispers.

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Jonathan rouses to the abrupt sound of his camera flashing loudly,

forcing tired eyes open to find Will standing at the end of the bed looking like a deer in headlights. Jonathan's gaze focuses in on the camera in the boy's hands and he sits up fast, at least, he tries to. The young teen turns his head and finds Steve's arms wrapped firmly around him, drooling on Jonathan's pillow and hair a proper mess.

"Will, give me the camera." He insists quietly, stretching his arm out with his palm up in the direction of the boy. The younger Byers takes a step back, starting to smile, he shakes his head and takes another picture. "Will!" He hisses, the boy snickers softly and holds out the camera for him to take.

"You're no fun," His brother tells him with a playful grin, Jonathan sets the camera down on his night stand and turns to Steve.

He tugs gently at the older boy's arm, trying to pry it away from his chest, Steve makes an irritated noise and pushes his face forward into Jonathan's shoulder. He glares when Will laughs again, far too amused with the situation, the boy finally relents and rolls his eyes with a smirk as he steps out of the room. Jonathan sighs, combing his fingers hesitantly through Steve's hair in an attempt to tame the wild locks that stick out in every direction.

"Steve?" He whispers, taps the elder's cheek and earns a sleepy scowl for his troubles. "Steve, wake up." He mutters, the teen opens bleary eyes to stare at Jonathan tiredly.

"Wha?" He mumbles, shifting on the mattress and sighing quietly.

"It's morning." He explains, and Steve squints both eyes as he turns

his head to look at the window. The teen sits up fast, looking dizzy for his efforts.

“Shit, I gotta go.” He’s scrambling out of the bed and hurrying to put on his clothes. Jonathan watches him with a small degree of sadness thrumming through him, wishing that they might have stayed sleeping for a little longer, that Will hadn’t gotten up to see them.

“See you later?” Jonathan asks as Steve yanks his jeans on, stumbling over to where his shoes are without buttoning them.

“Not today, maybe tomorrow, yeah?” Steve says breathlessly, glancing up at Jonathan with a faint smile. Jonathan nods his head, dropping back onto his pillow and turning his head to watch the older boy pull on his jacket and then hurry over to the window. “Catch you later, Byers!” He yanks the pane open and slips out of the opening, hurrying across the rooftop with soft footsteps and climbing down the gutter pipe with a few metallic creaks and quiet curses.

Jonathan smirks to himself, turning over and staring out of the window where the sun now shines in. He’s awfully tired but even just the memory of Steve wrapped up with him makes him smile just a little, he closes his eyes with a soft sigh.

“Jonathan,” He startles awake, realizing he dozed off. “Nana says you have five minutes to get out of bed or she’s getting the ice water.” Will says to him with a shake of his shoulder, he sits up with a snort and stretches out with a grunt.

“Thanks for the warning,” He yawns, slipping to the edge of the

mattress and dropping his feet onto the floor.

“Is Steve more than just your friend?” Will asks after a pause, and Jonathan frowns.

“Well yeah,” He squints his eyes a little when Will’s eyes widen. “He’s my best friend.” He grins, and Will nods slowly.

“O-Oh, yeah, okay.” He smiles, turning away and stepping from the room. “Come downstairs, nana is making pancakes.” He calls from the hallway. Jonathan runs a hand through his messy hair and stands up, ready to start the day.

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“You’re a lot like Jonathan, you know that?” Steve pokes Will in the arm when Jonathan disappears downstairs to help his grandmother get something from the basement, leaving the two of them in the room sorting through photos and reading comic books by themselves. Will smiles, obviously taking it as a compliment.

“Really?” He questions, and Steve nods his head as he settles a picture of the sun shining on some leaves in the woods down with the other nature photos.

“Not exactly alike, but if I had to pick out a relative from a group of little kids, I’d spot you in a heartbeat.” He assures with a small smile, and Will laughs quietly in response. He pulls out a box from

underneath Jonathan's bed, opening it to reveal more pictures.

"People always say I'm just like my mom," He offers, and Steve glances out of instinct over at one of the newer developed pictures on the floor that is of his mother on the porch with Trudy. Joyce had left relatively quick, but she seemed like a kind woman, someone who cared about her boys deeply.

"What about Jonathan?" He asks, and when there's not an immediate reply, he looks over at the boy. Will looks uncomfortable, frowning down at a picture he had just pulled from the shoebox, Steve looks over his shoulder.

"The hell?" He takes the photo carefully, Will scoots closer to him and moves the box with it. It's a picture of a pair of jean clad knees, the fabric torn open and the skin of the knees torn and bloody with the faded fabric staining dark from the crimson. Steve turns his eyes to the other photos, shifting through them, finding a strange sort of unease start to roll through him.

They vary, but one common factor is that they're all seemingly of Jonathan. Some of them are pictures from events, where someone has caught him in the spotlight, to others where he's in the background. There are others, shots that only Jonathan could have taken, of bruises and scrapes that are too many to simply be accidents or mishaps.

"He doesn't like to talk about it," Will says, his voice barely a whisper as he holds a picture of the bottom of Jonathan's face and his shirt covered chest, a vibrant bloodied lip that is very obviously the target of the photo.

“About what?” He murmurs, a swirling pit of anger and sadness forming deep in his stomach.

“Everything, he just doesn’t talk about it. He shuts himself in his room and turns up his music, and he thinks I didn’t know until recently but he cries… So much…” He shakes his head, dropping the picture in the box and pulling his knees up to his chest with a sigh. “He used to be different when we were little, my mom used to call him sunshine.” He smiles a little at that, but it’s weak and wavers after just a second.

“Being a teenager is tough,” Steve offers, still feeling uneasy.

“The kids at school pick on him, like they do me, but he doesn’t have anyone to defend him like I do.” He looks to Steve, eyes shining slightly. “Mom sent him here this summer because she’s scared he’s going to do something.” He whispers, cheeks pink and face drawn into a slightly angry grimace.

“L-Like…” Steve glances away, looking over at the empty doorway in thought. “Oh.” He murmurs, feeling his eyes start to sting. At the sound of footsteps, Will puts the pictures back and pushes the box under the bed again. Jonathan steps into the room, his hair pushed back from his face and a small smile quirking his lips.

“Hope you guys weren’t sharing secrets without me,” The younger says as he crouches down before sitting next to Steve, their knees knocking together unceremoniously. Steve wraps an arm around the younger, jostling him playfully and picking up one of the pictures.

“We were just talking about how we couldn’t tell if this was your thumb or your dick. They’re probably the same size, right?” He asks with a playful smirk, Jonathan rolls his eyes and shoves at his shoulder as Will giggles. Jonathan’s eyes crinkle with amusement when he smiles, crooked teeth baring for just a moment before he ducks his head.

“Cute, real cute. The only person here that would go out of their way to take a picture of their own dick is you.” He prods Steve in the chest with his finger, the older only smiling impishly. It doesn’t rid himself of the worry burrowing into his stomach, Will’s words echoing in his head. How is he supposed to protect Jonathan if he’s a state away?

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“You miss your little buddies?” Steve asks Will as they stroll down the dirt road leading to their secret place in the woods. Jonathan is a few feet away from them, listening quietly and kicking the scattered rocks that lay carelessly along the path.

“Yeah, but I’ll see them in a few days.” Will says, popping a chip into his mouth from the small bag clasped gently in his hand. “Besides, I wanted to see Jonathan.” He smiles, Jonathan turns his head with a small smirk of his own, seeming genuinely happy at the confession.

“You guys are disgusting,” Steve snorts, Will pushes at his hip and the older teen ruffles his bowl-shaped hair fondly. “I’m gonna miss you, little Byers. You kinda grew on me.” He offers, Will smirks up at him as he chews another chip, Steve steals one out of his bag. “Like a

fungus.” He pops the chip in his mouth and Will lets out a startled laugh.

“Steve,” Jonathan says, catching sight of a car coming down the dirt road. At first, Steve just gives him a dismissive wave as he tries to catch Will, the boy running around him in circles and refusing to give him another chip.

“C’mere, you shithead!” Steve snorts, the younger laughing giddily. The car isn’t slowing down, Jonathan’s unease begins to turn into panic.

“Steve!” Jonathan turns and grabs both his little brother and the older teen, yanking them off the road seconds before the car comes skidding to a halt in the dirt before them. A familiar face is in the driver’s seat, along with a few others crammed into the passenger and back seats.

“Look boys, wild fags.” Tommy says with a grin, the other teens in the car snickering and laughing along at the joke. Jonathan scowls, cheeks heating up with embarrassment and anger as Will hesitantly stands behind him.

“Piss off, Tom.” Steve insists, Tommy opens his car door and steps out. Jonathan watches him walk around the car, looking Jonathan and Steve up and down.

“I just don’t understand,” He sighs, crossing his arms and tilting his head. His hair shines in the light with the gel in it, and he was wearing a clean crisp white t-shirt and jeans. “You know how sad it is

for your best friend to go from king of high school to lonely little queer?" He shakes his head slowly, clicking his tongue disappointedly.

"Why can't you get a life?" Jonathan snaps, anger pulsing through him, he had had enough of this asshole. Tommy's eyes darken slightly, a quirk of his lips that is unnervingly chilling.

"The perv speaks!" He hisses with a smile, Jonathan grits his teeth. "How long did you sit up in those trees touching yourself, huh?" He steps closer, breathing in Jonathan's face.

"Like I would ever be able to get off looking at your face." Jonathan spits, and Tommy's face screws up before he grabs Jonathan by the shirt and yanks him towards the car. He jumps into the passenger seat and takes a tight hold on Jonathan's shirt, one of the other teens grabbing Jonathan's left wrist.

"Tommy, I swear to god!" Steve is rushing forward, trying to pry Jonathan away with growing concern. The engine of the car rumbles ominously, and Jonathan is immediately privy to the plan Tommy has, and he knows that it won't end pretty.

"Jonathan!" Will is at his back, a fist tight in his shirt and unsure as to what exactly was going on.

"Let me go!" Jonathan demands, unable to squirm out of their hold. The car's engine revs up, Jonathan's eyes widen and the car starts rolling. Tommy's dark eyes shine with malice, Jonathan starts to stagger along with the car as Steve takes a swing at the guy holding

onto the young teen's wrist. Will lets go, but Steve starts to walk hurriedly alongside them.

"Tommy, stop playing!" Steve snaps as they start to increase speed, Jonathan's legs helplessly forced to keep up with the car. He's leaned over the side of the car at an angle, Steve's hand on his collar and still trying his hardest to get Tommy to let go.

"You son of a bitch," Jonathan says through gritted teeth, his heart pounding in his chest.

"Gun it, Brian!" Tommy commands, and Jonathan's feet are yanked from underneath him as the car takes off down the dirt road, leaving Steve in the dust. He clutches at Tommy's jacket, turning his head slightly and squeezing his eyes shut as his legs drag painfully against the rough terrain. He can hear the boys howling with laughter, and just beneath it are the sounds of Will and Steve shouting distantly.

Jonathan's released suddenly, slamming into the dirt at a speed that leaves him rolling uncontrollably across the dirt with dust flying in the wake of the rough movement. He rolls to a stop on his side, legs burning and body aching painfully with the air knocked out of him so suddenly it takes a moment to even remember that he needs to breathe. The car's engine is a faint noise as footsteps race to his aid, Jonathan curls into himself, shaking. The dust in the air around him is sucked into his mouth when he pulls in frantic gasping breaths, drying out his mouth and making him cough.

"Jonathan?!" Will's voice trembles with tears, two sets of hands are on him and he opens his eyes when a familiar small hand presses to his cheek. "T-They wouldn't let go, I'm sorry…" Tears drip down Will's cheeks, Jonathan slowly turns himself over onto his back. His

body protests, especially his legs, Will's hand slips under the back of his head.

Steve's sitting over him, checking out his legs, where most likely the worst of the damage is. He can see an obvious dampness to the older boy's eyes, Jonathan takes a moment to catch his breath and then shakily starts to sit up. Will is immediately behind him, hands touching gently and pressing his chest to his older brother's back.

Jonathan looks down at his legs, his jeans are in shreds, starting to stain with blood. The visible skin is raw and scraped up, a few gashes on his shins and knees. Jonathan has a twisted thought that this would look fantastic as a picture, and suddenly realizes that his camera is no longer around his neck. He looks around frantically, catching sight of the discarded object across the road.

"My camera," He croaks, and Steve follows his line of sight and moves to retrieve it. He stares down at it a moment, glancing over at Jonathan with a grimace before returning. Jonathan takes the camera into shaking hands, biting his lip at the sight of the ruined instrument. The body is cracked open, the lens is shattered, the flash broken off, it's beyond repair. Even if he could fix it, he doesn't have the money to do so, he chucks the object angrily across the road with a grunt.

"Jonny, I'm sorry…" Steve whispers, and Jonathan wants to tell him to go away, Will too. He wants to be left alone to cry and scream out all of his frustrations, but he knows that they wouldn't let him even if he tried.

"I-I just want to go home," He says, tears in his eyes and voice shaking. His body is stinging from all the scrapes, he's filthy from

being dragged through the dirt. He goes to move, hissing when his ankle protests so intensely that a few tears drip from the corner of his eyes. Will settles a hand in the back of Jonathan's hair, combing gently to soothe him as he sniffles and wipes at his face with dirty hands.

"Here, I gotcha…" Steve grabs him carefully under the knees and wraps an arm around his upper waist before lifting him up off the ground. Jonathan is quick to hide his face in the older boy's chest, tears escaping down his cheeks and staining through the dirt smudged on his skin.

They were a good ten minutes from the house, Jonathan occasionally starts to nod off before Steve has to adjust his hold on the younger and jostles him awake once more unintentionally. Will is quiet, probably thinking about everything and weighing their options. Surely, he'd want to tell their grandmother and mother, but Jonathan isn't going to let that happen if he can help it. It wasn't like he hadn't been hurt before, just as badly as this, by kids at home. They had a tendency to take advantage of the small kid that rarely fought back, Will was experiencing something similar at his own school no doubt. Except kids got meaner in high school, took out their bigger frustrations on innocent victims without hesitation, without remorse.

They get back to the house and his nana's car is gone, most likely at the store or off visiting some of her friends in town. He vaguely recalls her getting ready earlier in the morning, primping her hair a little more than usual. Steve steps into the house after Will opens the door, carrying Jonathan up the stairs. He had to admit the older boy had quite the stamina, Jonathan might be small, but he wasn't tiny.

"Go get the first aid kit, L'il Byers." Steve instructs as he carries Jonathan past the bedroom and into the bathroom, settling him down

on the edge of the counter. Will disappears back down the stairs, leaving the teenagers by themselves, in quiet. “I’m sorry, Jonny, I wouldn’t blame you if you hated me for this.” He sighs, leaning against the opposite wall and rubbing his hands over his face tiredly.

Jonathan can’t find the words to speak, the adrenaline from being dragged having drained from him and taking all of his energy with it. Steve looks tired too, Jonathan could tell that before they got home though, from his increasingly frequent adjustments to Jonathan and the sweat soaking through his shirt. Jonathan can still smell him, a mix of deodorant and teenaged boy sweat, but he doesn’t exactly hate it.

“I don’t hate you,” He manages, his voice gravelly and exhausted.

“You should,” Steve disagrees, and Jonathan slowly shakes his head before sighing softly. “You should get clean, can you stand?” He offers a change in the subject, Jonathan slowly pushes himself forward to press his feet to the floor.

His legs sting, but that’s nothing but torn and bruised skin, his left ankle twinges when he tries to put pressure on it. Jonathan grows angry with himself for a moment, trying to force the ankle to take the weight, only to suddenly collapse. Steve moves fast, catching him before he can completely fall to the floor, letting Jonathan lean on him.

“How about I run you a bath, you’re really dirty.” He murmurs, helping Jonathan sit down on the lid of the toilet. Will returns with the first aid kit, along with a change of clothes for Jonathan. “Thanks, kiddo.” He takes the clothes and the kit, setting them down on the counter.

“Mom’s not gonna want you coming back here next summer,” Will says, Jonathan shoots him a glare.

“Mom’s not gonna know about this, neither is nana. I tripped down a steep hill, all right?” He warns, Will makes a face that says he sincerely disagrees with the lack of honesty. “You think the kids at school wouldn’t do this to me if they had the chance? You think they would hesitate to torture the faggot?” He snaps, and Will looks genuinely shocked at his brother’s words, Steve is silent.

“I won’t tell,” Will says finally, appearing almost guilty. “You fell,” He agrees.

“Thank you,” Jonathan says with slight relief, eyes sincere. Steve moves to start up the bath water, Jonathan shifts on the toilet, and Will leans against the open door. “How about you go color or something, all right?” He suggests, Will hesitates for a moment before nodding his head and turning away to head down the hall.

“He’s just worried about you,” Steve murmurs as he adjusts the temperature of the water, looking through the bottles of product on the edge of the tub for something to pour into the water.

“I’m the big brother, I’m the one that’s supposed to worry.” Jonathan grumbles in reply, staring down at the bathroom tile. Steve offers no reply for that, there’s a small pause where the only sound is the water running. “Thanks for trying to help.” He says, Steve leans back on his heels and runs a hand through his sweaty hair.

“I didn’t know what else to do,” Steve admits, sounding almost choked up. “Tommy’s always been kind of a dick but this is something else, he’s never been this cruel before.” He says with certainty, Jonathan hums under his breath in understanding but finds his mind miles away. “All right, that should be good… Strip.” Jonathan startles a little at his words.

“H-Huh?” He asks, eyes widening, and Steve smiles a little.

“To get into the bath, dude. I can leave if you want, but you can barely stand right now and I’m probably going to have to help you get out too.” He explains, and Jonathan nods his head quickly, cheeks flushing slightly.

“O-Oh, yeah… Let me just…” The younger quickly takes off his shoes, wary of his left ankle. Jonathan carefully pulls his dirty over-shirt off his shoulders, then strips off his t-shirt. He’s unbuckling his belt when Steve shuts off the water, pulling himself up with the assistance from the counter. He unzips his pants, feeling awkward as he leans on his right leg and starts to push his jeans off. The fabric brushes the raw and ripped skin of his shins and he winces, almost moving forward, Steve’s hand latches onto his arm to keep him upright.

“Get your left leg out first, the right leg will be harder.” Steve instructs, Jonathan does so, leaving only his right ankle trapped by the fabric of his jeans. Steve slips a hand around his back and leans over carefully, grabbing his jeans. “Lean on me and lift your leg.” He tells the younger, who follows the command quickly just as Steve pulls his jeans the rest of the way off.

He gets his underwear off by himself, finding it easier to shake off his

boxers than his jeans. There are bubbles in the water, and Jonathan finds himself thankful of that. Steve gets closer to him, and Jonathan finds relief in the fact that the older has his eyes shut respectfully. He helps Jonathan into the bath, and Jonathan is hissing in pain as the warm water stings his raw skin. Once he's seated, he turns his head to look at Steve where he is sitting on the toilet lid and wringing his hands together quietly.

"What's wrong?" Jonathan questions, noting the taxed expression on the older boy's face.

"I can't protect you when you go home," Steve says, and Jonathan feels his cheeks start to heat up again.

"I know," He murmurs, pushing some of the bubbles around and grabbing the rag on the edge of the tub. "I can take care of myself though," He says with a small nod, dipping the rag into the water.

"You have gravel in your hair," Steve says suddenly, leaning forward and dropping down onto his knees next to the tub. He leans over the edge, dipping his hand into the water and then reaching up to run it through Jonathan's hair.

"This isn't normal," Jonathan says without thinking, the words forced out of him by something etched into his brain. Steve freezes immediately, leaning back and looking guilty.

"Does it bother you?" Steve mumbles, eyes slightly widened.

“No, I just wanted to know if you thought it was normal.” He picks up his rag and starts scrubbing at the dirt and dried tears on his face, quickly losing interest in the confrontation. He doesn’t want this to stop, whether it’s because they’re both weird or whether Jonathan is just being weird, he’s content with his best friend’s strange intimacy.

“Oh, okay.” Steve seems to relax at this, edging closer again and reaching out. He takes a cup from the edge of the tub and fills it with water, splashing Jonathan’s chest with it. The both of them smile shyly, Jonathan chuckles and splashes Steve just a little.

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After his bath, Steve helps Jonathan get dressed again after he’s dried off and has his abrasions cleaned and bandaged as best as possible, then asks for his own shower. Jonathan offers to walk himself back to his room, but Steve insists on helping him again, holding Jonathan’s arm around his shoulders to keep the weight off of his left foot. Jonathan is helped into his bed and Steve disappears for a shower, leaving him alone to his thoughts.

It isn’t long until Will comes back into the room, probably having heard the shower turn on. He spots Jonathan in the room and gives a cursory glance back at the hall before shuffling into the room and climbing onto the bed. Jonathan is slightly surprised when the younger lays down right next to Jonathan and wraps an arm over the older Byers’ chest.

“What’s up?” He asks, reaching up to ruffle the younger’s hair.

“Are you okay?” Will questions in reply, and Jonathan nods his head as he stares up at the ceiling. “Would you stay here if you could?” He inquires shortly afterwards, and Jonathan funnily enough has to think about it for a moment.

“I’d miss you and mom too much, I think.” He says, and Will is quieted by that.

“Are you gonna miss Steve?” He mumbles, Jonathan sighs and combs his fingers through the boy’s hair distractedly.

“Of course, but we’re gonna write each other.” He explains, Will makes a surprised noise.

“That’s good.” He says, and Jonathan nods his head in agreement.

“Yeah, yeah it is.” They fall quiet for a little while, Jonathan turns his head when the shower shuts off, and in a few minutes Steve steps into the room with a towel around his waist. “Forget something?” Jonathan teases with a smirk, the young man scowls at him.

“I was too busy being a saint and hauling your ass around.” He replies wittily, Will laughs quietly as he sits up.

“Borrow something of mine.” Jonathan waves his hand at his dresser, and Steve starts to dig through his clothes quietly as Will gets up and heads over to his own bed to relax. Steve gets dressed quickly, the two brothers averting their eyes to the ceiling or the wall as he drops

the towel.

Once Steve is dressed, he climbs onto the bed next to Jonathan, who scoots over a bit to make room for the older. He leans over the bed to grab some comics, setting them on his lap and sorting through the small stack. Jonathan reaches his hands up to rest them behind his head, content with just laying back and closing his eyes.

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Steve spends the night the day before Jonathan's last day, he doesn't climb up through the window or demand to be let in late in the night, he asks politely and Jonathan accepts. Although Will has been gone for the last few weeks, and the bed on the other side of the room remains empty, Steve had climbed into the bed with Jonathan. That night, he hadn't slept much, unable to think about anything but the idea of not seeing Steve until the next year.

He stayed up even after Steve had dozed off, had startled at one point during the night when Steve's unconscious form slung an arm around him. He allowed himself one indulgence, turning his head slightly to bury his nose in Steve's hair. He smelled like shampoo and whatever the hell made Steve smell like Steve, a signature scent he'd probably never be able to put a name to except for simply Steve.

The next morning they had breakfast, and Steve takes him out for ice cream one final time. They sit inside the parlor, eating and talking, Steve worries about who his chemistry teacher will be. Jonathan feels empty inside almost the entire day, unable to do anything but fake his smiles and try his best not to seem sad. Steve seems in a similar situation for once, eyes less shiny than usual and looking rather sad whenever the conversation falls flat.

Eventually, they make their way back to the house just before three, when Will and Joyce are scheduled to come pick Jonathan up. Steve helps him get the rest of his things from his room, they're both quiet as Jonathan makes sure he has everything. Steve gets ahold of Jonathan's pictures once more, flipping through them as Jonathan looks through the dresser once more.

"Can I have this one?" Jonathan looks up, following Steve's face down to the picture held out for him to see. It's one of Jonathan and Steve, one Will had taken a few days before Jonathan's camera had been smashed. They're walking down the road together, Steve's arm carelessly slung over Jonathan's shoulder and his other arm flung out in a grand gesture. Steve is obviously telling some story, mouth open in a bright grin as he speaks, and Jonathan is smiling quietly.

"Y-Yeah, sure." He looks back down at the empty dresser and blinks away the sting in his eyes. He listens to Steve start to put the pictures up, pocketing the one he wants. Jonathan places the pictures in a container that goes into one of his suitcases. Steve helps him carry his things downstairs and onto the porch, where his nana is waiting.

"Oh I'm going to miss you," She pulls him into a hug immediately, he squeezes her back and breathes in the scent of her perfume, something flowery. "I'll see you on Christmas, and then you'll come back next summer, right?" She questions as they pull apart, he nods his head.

"Definitely," He agrees without hesitation, just as the car pulls off of the road and starts coming down the dirt path. He turns to Steve, the young man looks a little forlorn before he realizes Jonathan is watching him, then he smiles brightly.

“C’mere, little dude.” He pulls Jonathan into a tight hug, the both of them squeezing far tighter than necessary. Jonathan presses his nose to Steve’s shoulder and tries to commit his scent to memory, realizing that it’ll be the last time he smells it in quite a while. “You be good, okay?” He says when they grudgingly release one another, ruffling Jonathan’s shaggy hair.

“I think I’m supposed to say that,” He offers as a reply, Steve smiles a little more genuinely this time.

“Not on your life, kid.” He reaches out to nudge the younger with his hand, Jonathan returns it by pushing him gently. “Get going before I hold you hostage.” He nudges Jonathan again, and the younger heads down off the porch and over to the car. Will gets out to help him with his suitcase, the older climbs into the car once his bags are loaded up.

“Ready to go?” Joyce questions, Jonathan is busy looking out of the window where Steve is climbing down the porch.

“Yeah,” He agrees, waving when Steve lifts his hand to signal his goodbye. He turns his head to watch Steve grow fainter into the distance as they drive down the pathway, sighing once they turn onto the main road and he fades out of sight completely. Jonathan turns around in his seat, pulling out his Walkman and slipping his headphones over his ears, it was going to be a long drive home.

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Jonathan throws his backpack down when he walks into the house, heading straight to the bathroom. He drops down onto his knees in front of the tub and twists the faucet on, leaning his head under the stream to clean the spitballs from his hair. He shuts off the faucet after a few minutes, wringing out his hair and pushing it back out of his eyes before getting to his feet.

He avoids looking at himself in the mirror, rubbing at the bruise forming where Rich Williams' fist had impacted against his sternum. Jonathan heads back into his room and closes his door behind him, flipping the lock and walking over to turn on some music. He fiddles with the player and then twists the knob on the volume, stepping over to his desk and sinking down into the chair.

He grabs a piece of paper and a pencil, turning on his desk lamp and biting at the wood of the pencil for a moment. Jonathan thinks to himself for a bit, letting the music blaring in the room soothe him to a degree. Eventually, he places his pencil down on the paper with a small sigh.

Dear Steve,

Today was the first day back to school, I can't say that it was the most exciting day in the world. My new math teacher seems like a total bitch, she gave us the whole 'bad grades means you have no dedication' spiel. One of the guys at school has already started up with his usual bullshit, can I just say that I shouldn't know what someone else's spit feels like on my skin. I have some homework, but luckily not a lot, I hope school isn't as awful there as it is here. I miss talking to you, is it creepy to say I'm already counting down the days until summer?

Sincerely, Jonathan.

He sets his pencil down and quickly folds the paper over, snagging a

nearby envelope and shoving the paper inside. He searches through the papers on his desk and once he finds the paper he's looking for, quickly writes down the address he was given just a few days before. He stares down at the envelope for a moment, Bowie crooning from across the room as Jonathan rubs an anxious hand over his cheek. A few droplets of water slide down his neck from his hair, dampening his shirt. Another droplet drips down his cheek, warmer and holding more weight to it.

"Fuck," He wipes at his face angrily with his jacket sleeve, pulling open the envelope and ripping up the piece of paper inside, grabbing another one and picking up his pencil again.

Dear Steve,

School started today, it's boring and dull as always, but my teachers seem okay. I don't have much homework but I expect it soon, I hope 11th grade isn't too hard. Are you talking to your old friends again, anybody but Tommy of course. I'm sure you'll be okay, you're gonna make all kinds of new friends this year. Don't skip too many classes, I've heard junior year is tough. Anyways, I hope you find the time to write back soon.

Sincerely, Jonathan

Jonathan frowns as he folds the paper carefully, putting it into the envelope and sealing it up this time. He sets the envelope down and stands up from his desk, walking over to his bed and climbing onto it, shoving his face into a pillow and losing himself in his thoughts.

He realizes that Steve will forget about him, Jonathan will likely get back to his nana's house next summer and Steve won't even remember him. He internally kicks himself for even getting attached in the first place, good things never last. He pulls in a deep breath

and lets it out carefully, trying to put Steve out of his mind.

He's surely not in Steve's thoughts, so he shouldn't even attempt to fret over such stupid feelings.

5. The Intruder

Jonathan can't help the smile on his face as he walks up to the Wheeler house, the letter in his pocket being the source of his sudden happiness. Funnily enough, Steve had kept up their letters all year, and now the summer was fast approaching. Steve hadn't been lacking in energy when it came to his letters, scribbling messily but legible about this and that. Their letters had gone from a few sentences to a few paragraphs, from one half of a page, to the front and back of two pages.

Nana hadn't come over for Christmas, her car had been acting up and she didn't want to risk breaking down on the drive over. Joyce couldn't get off work, so they couldn't go visit her either, so that was a slight snag in their plan. It wouldn't have mattered if he had gone to his nana's anyway though, he still wouldn't have seen Steve. Steve's parents had decided to go on a trip to the Caribbean for Christmas, and Steve promised to tell him all about it when he got home. Apparently, it was very nice, but also very boring because according to Steve, none of the people he met there were good company like Jonathan. That had made him smile, of course, just like all of Steve's letters.

He hadn't yet read this letter, but he had glanced at the beginning, in which Steve had mentioned them starting swimming lessons as soon as Jonathan gets back over there. He had teased in the first paragraph about buying a floatie, and Jonathan had laughed to himself in the car while he was parked on the curb. A lot had changed in the last year, but one thing that had stayed the same was Steve's ability to make him laugh.

He knocks on the door and smiles when Karen Wheeler answers the door, a small smile on her own face.

“Hi Jonathan, Will’s still downstairs but he should be up in a minute.” She explains, moving out of the way for him to come inside. He didn’t spend a lot of time in the Wheeler house, but he had been over countless times to just pick up his brother.

“Thank you,” He nods his head with a smile, the woman smiles pleasantly at him.

“Excited about the summer?” She questions, he nods his head in pliant agreement. “I heard from your mother that you spent last summer at your grandmother’s house in Iowa.” She says, and he smiles.

“Yes, I did.” He agrees, and she leans against the banister of the stairs with an inquisitive expression.

“Had a good time, then?” She asks, he nods once more.

“I’m going back in a few days,” He tells her, unable to help himself. Usually he was quite shy, but Steve’s letters always put him in a talkative and upbeat mood.

“Excited?” She asks, and he hums in agreement. “I wish I had a place to send Nancy this summer, she’s been in such a sour mood lately.” She shakes her head with a sigh, and Jonathan falters a little, frowning. He didn’t know Nancy very well, but he had heard about her best friend going missing suddenly a few months before. He imagines Steve going missing and a silent chill runs over his body, he

clasps his hands together behind his back and squeezes them together anxiously.

“Hey Jonathan,” Will comes out from the kitchen, smiling brightly and hurrying over to stand by his side.

“Ready?” He questions, and the boy nods his head.

“Yeah, bye, Mrs. Wheeler!” He waves, the woman says goodbye and they leave out the door. The younger seemed to vibrate with energy, which Jonathan took as a sign that his game went well.

“Did you win?” He asks as they walk down the sidewalk towards the car, Will nods his head.

“Yeah, there was this giant Gorgon and Dustin smashed its head in!” He explains excitedly, Jonathan nods his head along with the boy’s happy chatter. His little brother’s affinity for the strange game was a little endearing, if not weird when hearing it from an outsider’s point of view. But Jonathan figured, whatever made Will happy, was all right in his book.

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“Mom, I’m not spending the summer with Nancy Wheeler!” Jonathan objects immediately at the new plan that was just sprung on him. He was supposed to leave tomorrow for his nana’s house, had sent his last letter to Steve the day before promising his soon return. And

now, his mother was trying to corrupt it all with the presence of some girl he barely knows!

“Nana thinks it’s a good idea and Karen is at her wit’s end with Nancy’s attitude, we figured that if this was good for you then why not try it for her?” She explains, Jonathan shakes his head angrily and runs his fingers through his hair. He pictures Nancy Wheeler following Jonathan and Steve around, intruding on their late night talks, complaining about him sneaking out the window late at night.

“She’s going to ruin it, she’ll ruin it!” He insists, and his mother’s expression darkens slightly.

“Jonathan, couldn’t you be nice to her? Maybe she’ll make good friends with you and Steve!” She offers, and Jonathan shakes his head. He has an image of Steve with an arm wrapped around Nancy and has the urge to wreck everything in the general vicinity, he’s Steve’s best friend, not Nancy!

“I don’t want another friend, I want to spend the summer with Steve, my best friend.” He puts emphasis on the words ‘best friend’, crossing his arms and clenching his jaw.

“Well Karen is dropping Nancy off tomorrow morning and you’ll just have to make do.” She says with finality, Jonathan grunts in frustration and turns to storm out of the kitchen. He slams his door behind him and throws himself onto his bed, having the urge to scream until he can’t anymore. Instead, he takes in a few deep breaths, and thinks of Steve.

That night, he goes through some pictures he'd taken of his trip and mourns his camera a little more. He wishes he could have his camera back, so he could at least take a few more pictures this summer. He would just have to keep his memory strong, he eventually relents, and wonders what Steve would think of his newly gained height. Although he hadn't gotten much taller, it was enough to make him look a little bigger.

The kids at school didn't bother him as much as they used to, but the taunting hadn't stopped completely. Just a few months before, he'd taken a swing at one of the guys in his grade that had tried to corner him in the bathroom. The guy scowled at him from time to time, but hadn't tried anything since, and it made him feel good. He hadn't told Steve about that, for fear of him worrying, but he couldn't wait to catch up with the older boy.

Will comes into his room just before bed, climbing onto his mattress with a smirk on his face. Jonathan makes room for him amongst the pictures spread out on the bed, and the boy presses against his side casually. He wouldn't be heading to camp for another few days, but Jonathan was sure he was excited too.

"Are you ready to see Steve?" Will asks with a smile, picking up one of the pictures of Steve cuddling Jonathan in his sleep that the younger Byers had taken.

"Yeah, I guess." He offers nonchalantly with a small shrug of his shoulders, taking the picture from Will and staring down at it for a moment. "But now Nancy's coming." He mutters, Will nudges him gently.

"Nancy's cool, she's been kind of a jerk since she's gotten older but

she was always nice to us when we were little." The younger explains to him with sincerity, and even though Will is seeing the bright side, Jonathan can't relate. All he could think about was Nancy ruining everything, trying to be as close to Steve as Jonathan is.

"Whatever," He mumbles, throwing the picture down with the others with a sigh. "Ready for camp?" He questions, changing the subject, watching Will's eyes light up.

"Yeah, totally." He grins, turning his head to look through all the pictures. "I'm gonna miss you and mom, but I'll come to nana's after I get home from camp." He assures, and then turns his head. "I'm excited to see Steve again." He confides, and Jonathan smiles.

"Me too." He agrees, watching the younger climb off of the bed and walk over to the door. He starts to gather up his pictures, turning his head when he notices that Will hasn't left the room, instead standing in the doorway quietly.

"Don't let those guys get away with messing with you, okay? They could have really hurt you last time." He says before Jonathan can even ask what's wrong, the older frowns. "Have a good time, but keep away from those kids." He insists, like Jonathan might have when talking about Will going to camp in his first few camp years.

"Okay," He agrees, and Will nods in understanding.

"Night, Jonathan." He turns away, stepping across the hall. Jonathan leans over his bed and grabs out his shoebox of pictures, picking up one of the pictures in the pile that had escaped his notice until now.

A picture of his swollen wrist posed against the windowsill at his nana's house, hours after first meeting Steve. He swallows quietly, staring at it for a moment, before throwing it in the box and forcing the lid back on.

Jonathan slides his fingertips over the lid of the box, sighing out through his nose and debating whether or not he should bring it this time around. He rarely looked at the pictures but he had the urge to keep them near, something about them kept him sane, like they were proof of the reason he was the way he is. But they were almost a punishment as well, something he forced himself to witness, to make his insides knot up with self-hatred.

It was almost therapeutic, to look at something that explained why Jonathan was so twisted and fractured. Hell, some of the really old photos near the bottom were pictures of marks his father put on him. Jonathan might not be able to stand looking at his body or his face, but the images of his skin torn and abused made him feel better somehow. It was like he was seeing himself in his natural state, as it should be, broken and beaten down. He didn't know what that meant but thinking about the psychology behind it made it feel like he was losing his mind.

The box under his hands feels rougher than it did a moment ago, he picks it up and lowers it underneath his bed so he doesn't have to look at it anymore. He gathers up the rest of his pictures and puts them in the plastic container he keeps in his nightstand. He smiles down at one of Steve and reminds himself that in only a couple of hours, he'd be seeing that face again. Jonathan doesn't have a hard time getting to sleep, he doesn't have much of a memory of his dreams, but he thinks Steve might have been in one of them.

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Nancy climbs into the car with them the next morning, seeming to be quietly steaming about the situation herself as well. Jonathan sits in the front seat, barely sparing the girl a glance before grinning to himself as he adjusts the bag at his feet. He puts on his headphones, hitting play on his Walkman, and ready to count the miles until they reach the house. Nancy keeps quiet the whole time, probably angry about the entire situation, and Jonathan can remember his own muted anger his first ride to his nana's for the summer.

It was worth it, all of it was worth it because of Steve.

He's leaned forward in his seat, tapping hands nervously against his thighs and his Walkman already put away by the time they hit the familiar road. When his mother turns onto the dirt road leading to the house, Jonathan is surprised to see a red car parked next to his grandmother's, frowning as they pull up. He doesn't recognize the car, but it's nice looking, maybe a friend of his grandmother's?

"Here we are!" Joyce says with a small smile, Jonathan scrambles to get out of the car and pulls his backpack out behind him. He races around to grab his suitcase from the trunk, and at the sound of the porch door swinging open, he looks up.

"Jonathan Byers!" Steve cheers loudly, Jonathan drops his suitcase and his backpack immediately, racing around. Steve leaps off of the porch and they collide, Jonathan wrapping his arms around Steve's shoulders and getting swung around with the momentum of the collision. He smells just like Jonathan remembered, and even though Jonathan had gotten taller, Steve had as well. To keep his nose in Steve's neck he has to stand on his toes slightly, leaned against the older boy without hesitation.

“It’s so good to see you!” Jonathan grins as they break apart, Steve takes him by the shoulders to look him over in awe. His hair is longer, having grown into a bit of a mullet that runs down his neck in short strands.

“Who are you and what have you done with the little runt I met last year?” He demands jokingly with a small smirk, Jonathan shoves at him before taking a fistful of Steve’s shirt to pull him back into another hug. “What have you been feeding this kid, Joyce?” Steve asks with a laugh, the woman smiles as she climbs from the car.

“I don’t know to be honest,” She plays along as Jonathan slips away from his embrace to fetch his suitcase and bag.

“Please don’t tell me that’s Will,” He snorts at the sight of Nancy, the girl shoots him quite the look as she grabs out one of her suitcases.

“Oh this is Nancy, her little brother is friends with Will.” Joyce explains, Steve nods his head without breaking his gaze away from the girl. Jonathan had told Steve about her before, only in passing, but Steve always listened when Jonathan talked to him.

“Let me see if I remember correctly, Mike?” He questions, looking to Jonathan, who nods his head. “That’s cool, nice to meet you.” He smiles charmingly at the girl, Jonathan feels a pulse of agitation shoot through him.

“You too,” The girl offers politely, stepping past him and up to the

porch where Jonathan's nana is waiting. "Where will I be staying if you don't mind me asking?" She questions the older woman with a small smile, nana smiles and points her inside.

"Up the stairs, second door on the left." She explains, and Jonathan breathes a quiet sigh of relief that they wouldn't be sharing a room. Of course it wasn't that he expected they would, but he often had a habit of imagining the worst possible scenario. Jonathan could still have Steve over, could still sneak out the window late at night to talk, could fall asleep with Steve's warmth beside him.

He suddenly wondered if Steve would treat him differently after all this time, they were older now. He has a frantic moment where he thinks about Steve going back to sleeping in Will's bed, or not sleeping over at all. His internal panic is interrupted when Steve slings an arm around his shoulders and squeezes him close playfully.

"It's so good to see you again," Jonathan says, the older boy grins lazily with a nod.

"Been counting the days," He says without hesitation, and Jonathan thinks back to his first letter that summer, the way he'd censored himself from saying that same exact thing. "You should go unpack and then we can go get ice cream in town," He steps over to the bright red convertible, and Jonathan anxiously points to it.

"Is that yours?" He questions, and Steve nods his head.

"What can I say? My parents buy my obedience and affection." He says with a mild gesture, the joke falls slightly flat and he nervously

smiles.

“All right, I’ll unpack.” He agrees, walking over to pick up his bag and suitcase. Steve beats him to the suitcase, ruffling his hair like he had done the year before and then patting him on the back.

“I’ll help.” He offers, and Jonathan can’t really say no to that.

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They make their way up the stairs, Jonathan barely spares a glance at the cracked open door across the hall from his room where Nancy is inside unpacking. As soon as Jonathan steps into the room, he has the realization that everything is the exact same as he left it except for a small blue package on his bed. Jonathan glances back at Steve when the older boy crowds up behind him, wary at the sight of Steve’s mischievous smirk.

“Wonder what that is…” Steve offers, giving Jonathan further suspicion at his lack of skilled acting. He sets his backpack down and walks over to the bed, sinking down on the mattress and taking the badly wrapped box into his hands.

“Steve,” He warns, and the young man shushes him and throws himself onto the bed.

“Open it,” He insists, propping his head up on his hand. Jonathan hesitates a moment more before curiosity wins out and he starts to

tear the paper from the box, eyes widening at the sight of the picture on the box.

“Steve, I can’t…” He shakes his head in disbelief, fingers brushing the photo of a very nice camera.

“Just think of it as a late Christmas present,” The older boy squirms suddenly and reaches into his pocket, tugging something small from it and holding it out to Jonathan. He takes the roll of film carefully, a small smile on his face. “And that’s your birthday present.” He adds, Jonathan chuckles quietly.

“I-I didn’t get you anything.” He says, feeling guilty as he sets the camera box on his knee and shifts the roll of film in his palm.

“How about you use that roll to make me a bunch of cool pictures that I can hang up on my wall?” He suggests, and Jonathan smirks at him as the young man stares up at the ceiling and gestures grandly. “I’m thinking about redecorating, and I only want top quality art on my walls.” He says with a grin, Jonathan laughs and sets the camera and film on the bedside table.

He moves himself up near the head of the bed where Steve is reclined against a pillow lazily, making himself comfortable on his side next to the older boy. Steve turns his head, his grin softening into a small smile, Jonathan tenses slightly when he reaches out and slings an arm over the younger boy’s side.

He’s pulled forward against Steve’s chest, the older boy’s arm slipping under his head to hug him close. Jonathan sits very still for a

moment, his face close to Steve's chest and his arms still at his side. He carefully reaches up to wrap an arm over Steve's waist, pressing his face down against the older boy's shirt and unable to help the joyful giggle that forces its way from his throat.

Steve laughs softly, a breathy noise as he squeezes Jonathan gently. They just lay there for a moment, holding each other, and at the sound of footsteps Steve releases him. Jonathan rolls over and sits up, running his fingers through his mussed hair and watching as his mom appears in the doorway.

"Well, I'm off." She says, a sad smile on her face, Jonathan gets to his feet and hugs her gently. She holds him for a little too long, her face against his shoulder, he eventually has to step back to break it up.

"Love you," He says easily, and she nods her head before leaning up on her toes to smack a kiss to his cheek.

"I love you too, sweetheart." Jonathan blushes as she smooths out his shirt in the most motherly way possible, before leaning to the side to peer behind him. "Take care of my boy this summer, Steve." She says teasingly, Jonathan turns his head to watch the older teen give a mock salute from his place still laying in the bed.

"You have my word, Joyce." He assures, and she smiles with an amused hum. "Safe trip home, tell the little squirt hi for me." He offers casually, she nods her head and shoots him a thumbs-up.

"All right, have fun." Joyce takes the hem of Jonathan's shirt and pulls on it gently to smooth it out again, a distracted habit. "Be nice

to Nancy, okay?" She says, shooting him a mild look, he nods his head grudgingly.

"I will," He agrees, and the woman carefully pulls herself away and steps back to the door. "Bye!" He calls, she waves and then disappears down the hall. Jonathan throws himself back on the bed, giving a startled grunt when his back lands on Steve's legs.

"So what's this chick's problem? She need someone to teach her how to be cool like you?" The older teen taunts as he sits up, Jonathan rolls his eyes.

"Her friend died a while back, attitude problems or something." He sighs, closing his eyes and thinking for a moment while they're both quiet. "Help me unpack?" He finally mutters, and Steve chuckles under his breath.

"You're lazy, little dude." He snorts, and Jonathan reaches up to shove at Steve's face playfully. "I suppose I could help you." He says with an overdramatic sigh, Jonathan slides off the bed and stands up straight.

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When Steve said he'd help, Jonathan quickly realized the older boy meant laying on the bed with the suitcase on the floor nearby and occasionally digging through it to comment on Jonathan's lack of variety in clothes. He watches Steve pick up a shirt and bring it to his nose to sniff it, Jonathan watches him with a small amused smile as Steve realizes he's being watched and starts making a face as if the

shirt stinks.

“You know you’re supposed to wash clothes, right?” He says jokingly, Jonathan rolls his eyes for the millionth time since his arrival and steps over to grab some more clothes to put into the dresser. “We should invite Nancy to go get ice cream with us.” He murmurs suddenly, Jonathan feels a lance of irritation spear through him.

“No way,” He refuses, Steve glances over at him curiously.

“What, she mean to you or something?” He asks with a small smile, but there’s a sort of seriousness hidden by the humor, like if Jonathan was really bothered by the girl he might have to do something about that.

“No, I just don’t want her with us.” He mutters, feeling embarrassed at his bold possessiveness of his friend. Steve doesn’t seem very bothered by it though, almost amused at the idea as he rolls over onto his back and stretches out his arms on either side of him.

“Don’t be a stick in the mud, Jonny boy. We’ll still have our time in the sun, let her join us for a bit.” He coaxes, Jonathan shoves the last of his clothes into his dresser and shuts the drawer, sighing.

“Fine.” He agrees, and Steve sits up before sliding his legs off of the mattress and planting his shoes on the ground before standing up.

“All right, let’s go get some ice cream, little dude.” He wraps an arm

around Jonathan's shoulders and ushers him out into the hallway, stopping in front of Nancy's door. He knocks gently on the partially open door, and Nancy appears with a small frown.

"Yeah?" She murmurs, Steve simply smiles, unaffected by her hesitancy.

"Jonny and I were wondering if you'd like to come into town with us and get some ice cream." He offers, and Nancy glances over at Jonathan before warily looking back at Steve.

"All right," She agrees with a nod, stepping back from the door. "Let me grab my purse." She says, Steve takes Jonathan by the shoulder and starts to pull him towards the stairs.

"Rude young man, get over here and give your nana a hug!" Nana catches them at the bottom of the stairs, Jonathan smiles bashfully and doesn't hesitate to push into her arms and squeeze her tight. "You're getting so big, soon you'll be all grown up." She says with a ruffle of his hair.

"Not just yet, nana." He reminds her, and she hums.

"No, not yet." She agrees, leaning back and patting his cheek. "Where are you headed?" She questions, Steve tugs playfully at Jonathan's shirt collar and Jonathan turns around to push at him.

"Ice cream, Trudy." Steve answers dutifully, and nana nods her head.

“Is Nancy going with you?” She asks, glancing towards the stairs, seconds later Nancy comes down the stairs with her purse on her shoulder.

“Yeah,” The boys agree quietly, and the older woman leans out to press a kiss to Jonathan’s cheek before ushering them towards the door.

“Well go on then, have fun!” She insists, the teens step out the door and down the porch, over to the car. Steve pushes Jonathan as he passes, Jonathan laughs as he balances himself against the hood for a second before heading around to get in the passenger seat.

“Nice car,” Nancy says as she climbs into the back, Steve starts up the car with a carefree grin.

“Yeah, helps me get all the ladies.” He smirks at Jonathan, who scoffs with disbelief and a small uncomfortable bit of agitation as Steve backs away from the house. He focuses his eyes on the window after buckling his seatbelt, watching the house disappear in a cloud of dust as they drive off the dirt path and onto the road.

“What do you do in this town?” Nancy questions, leaning forward between the seats and making Jonathan uncomfortable by her sudden closeness. He slips his hands between his thighs anxiously and leans forward slightly, trying to keep his shoulders from hunching up too much.

“It’s pretty boring, mostly we just hang out and talk. Jonny likes to drag me to the library sometimes, but mostly he just likes to take pictures of me.” He jokes, reaching over to ruffle Jonathan’s hair, the younger leans out of his reach with a small smile.

“You have a camera?” Nancy asks, Jonathan nods his head. “You don’t talk much, do you?” She chuckles, and Steve lets out a startled laugh.

“That’s why we work, I never shut up and Jonny can’t hold a conversation.” He jabs Jonathan in the side, the younger yelping in surprise and slapping his hand away.

Steve takes a turn and they pull into a parking spot outside of the ice cream shop, Jonathan unbuckles himself and slips out of the car. As he steps up onto the sidewalk, turning to wait for Steve and Nancy, he’s suddenly slammed into. He staggers off the sidewalk, narrowly catching himself before he can topple over, turning at the sound of laughter.

“Look who’s back, the faggot decided to show his face after all.” Tommy grins, his friends huddled close and leering at Jonathan menacingly.

“This your boyfriend, Stevie boy?” A tall teen with long blonde hair and a wispy mustache says with a smirk, Jonathan doesn’t recognize him, but he freezes up when the young man reaches out to adjust Jonathan’s over shirt and brush at his shoulder.

“Hey!” Steve steps between them, planting a hand on the young

man's chest with a scowl. "I won't warn you twice, Billy. Keep your hands off him." He threatens quietly, the two young men have an intense stare off for a moment.

"King Steve, I'd like you to remember that all reigns come to an end, usually an ugly one." He shoves Steve back casually, then steps back and turns on his heel. "See you around, faggot." He winks at Jonathan as he passes, knocking their shoulders together roughly. The three turn their heads, watching the boys walk past the cars

"Someone's not very popular around here," Nancy mutters, Steve wraps an arm around Jonathan and reaches up to tussle his hair distractedly.

"Who was that?" Jonathan questions, Steve shakes his head quietly and nudges him forward into the ice cream parlor. Nancy follows behind them, and Jonathan is immediately struck with unease at the way Steve kept checking behind him.

"One fudge ripple, a cup of vanilla and chocolate swirl, and uh…" Steve glances back at Nancy, who's currently looking down at all the flavors.

"Strawberry, please." She says after a moment, Steve nods his head and the employee gets to making their order. Jonathan watches with mild anxiety as Steve looks over his shoulder again, he seemed tense. The last time Steve was that tense was when Tommy had dragged Jonathan by the car.

They get their ice cream, Nancy and Steve's in a cone and Jonathan's

in a cup, and Steve surprisingly wants to sit down inside. They take a seat near the window and away from the counter, Steve glaring out the window and eating his ice cream distractedly.

“Who’s Billy?” Jonathan says suddenly, feeling rather angry at being kept out of the loop when apparently he was one of the people being targeted by him.

“Just some guy, he’s in my grade… He just moved here, he’s white trash.” Steve mutters, taking a lick of his ice cream and sighing quietly. “He got into a fight with one of the guys I’m friends with in March, broke his jaw real bad. He’s dangerous, okay? Don’t let him get you alone anywhere.” He reaches over and rests his hand on Jonathan’s arm, squeezing lightly and looking out the window again.

“Don’t tell me there’s someone worse than Tommy.” Jonathan says jokingly, feeling nervous but not willing to show it.

“I mean it, Jonathan. Don’t provoke him, don’t even look directly at him. He’ll do worse than drag your legs on a dirt road, he’d probably flip you upside down and let the rocks scalp you.” Jonathan swallows at the seriousness of Steve’s tone, glancing away and mixing his ice cream quietly.

“Jesus, you two are dramatic.” Nancy mutters, licking her ice cream cone. “What do they have against you anyway, are you dating?” She questions, licking a drop of pink liquid off her hand when it drips on her.

“D-Dating?” Jonathan repeats, baffled, why would she think that?

“Course not,” Steve huffs, and Jonathan feels a little more confident in nodding in agreement, even if it does make him feel a little sick for some reason. Steve’s hand slips off of his arm and he puts his lips over the top of his ice cream, taking a little off the top and smearing it over his lips in the process. Jonathan is quick to hand him a napkin, the older boy smiling in thanks and taking it.

“Boys are weird,” Nancy says quietly, licking her ice cream again. Jonathan glances over at Steve, who’s now staring down at the table in thought.

Yeah, he supposed they were.

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There was a significant difference between his expectations and reality for Jonathan’s summer so far, he had only been here a few hours and he could feel himself starting to slip further away from the conversation and into his own thoughts. He hated how much Nancy talked to Steve, how she kept brushing his shoulder with her own as they walked through the field towards the lake. They had been talking since they had gotten in the car, and Jonathan was starting to feel like he’d felt for years, alone and forgotten. That little voice in his head was starting to grow louder, the one that had to point out everything he was trying to ignore. He tried to remember if Steve ever smiled at him like that, if Steve ever laughed that loud and genuine with him. How could Jonathan compare with someone smart and pretty and social like Nancy Wheeler?

“Jonny boy, Earth requests your presence!” Steve breaks him from his

thoughts, waving a hand in front of Jonathan's face and wrapping an arm around his shoulders. Jonathan wants to feel grateful for the attention, but his mood is already soured, he's not angry but the ever-present pit in his stomach has swallowed any remnant of emotions he can usually grasp at.

"What?" He murmurs, hands fidgeting with his new camera. It really was gorgeous, probably expensive, but Jonathan knows he'd give it back without hesitation if it meant getting Steve all to himself this summer.

"What's going on in that big brain of yours, little dude?" Steve knocks gently on Jonathan's head with his knuckle, the younger scowls in irritation but it's like trying to spark a wet match, the feeling doesn't stay. He hates himself in that moment, for being so nonsensically grim and unhappy. He had been waiting for months for this moment, and now that he was here he wasn't enjoying himself.

Ungrateful brat, that's all you've ever been.

"Are you spending the night?" He asks, just to stop his father's voice from repeating itself on an endless loop like it often did. He keeps his eyes on the ground as they wade through the weeds. He couldn't look at Steve right now, he didn't want to ruin his good mood by looking so somber.

"No can do, the dictators requested my presence at home this evening for beginning of summer cleaning." He scoffs dryly, and Jonathan is brought back to the memory of Steve showing up at the window with a busted lip.

“You can come over after if you want to,” He offers, not wanting to divulge any private information to the intruder standing on Steve’s other side.

“I’ll think about it, but if you don’t mind I will definitely spend tomorrow night over.” He pokes Jonathan in the chest, who nods quietly and forces a small smile onto his face. It was like all of his emotions were locked in a box in his chest, the only feelings he could grasp at were a vague urge to scream and a tepid sense of dissatisfaction.

“You guys swim in this?” Nancy asks cautiously as they approach the water, earning Steve’s attention immediately.

“Yeah, it’s fun!” Steve says with a wave of his arms, grabbing Jonathan around the waist and hauling him into the air. He staggers forward to the edge of the water, holding Jonathan a foot off the ground. “Let’s swim, Jonny!” He cheers, the younger yelps in panic and flails wildly, Steve laughs as he sets Jonathan down.

“I’m wearing my camera, asshole.” Jonathan fixes his shirt and nervously fusses with his hair, a small blush on his cheeks as Steve spins in a circle and tromps over to a tree.

“We met under this tree, you know.” Steve tells Nancy, pointing over to the place that Jonathan painfully remembered as his landing point. Faded weeds were sprouting from the dirt, but they didn’t completely conceal the large roots that were sticking out. Jonathan can feel a phantom ache in his lower back from where he hit one of the roots, reaching back to itch at the place.

“Really now? Was it an act of fate?” She teases, Steve grabs onto a branch and lifts himself off the ground with only the use of his arms. He had a little more muscle than he used to, Jonathan notes, in an attempt to not look at the way his shirt was riding up to reveal a dark line of hair leading from his bellybutton to his waistband.

“I’d say so, what say you, Jonny?” He questions, Jonathan smirks a little and shrugs. “Well at least I think so, if you hadn’t taken a rock to the head I never would have met my best friend!” He drops down and steps closer, Jonathan makes a startled noise as he’s hefted off the ground and over Steve’s shoulder in a fireman’s carry.

“A rock to the head?” Nancy questions, but Jonathan is a little busy being manhandled and Steve is occupied with being far too entertained by it.

“Just because you got bigger doesn’t mean you can carry me around, bigfoot!” Jonathan gripes, kicking his legs and trying to keep himself as upright as possible but it’s difficult with the way he’s positioned.

“He’s such a little grump sometimes, I find that tormenting him makes him smile.” Steve jokes, starting to spin in a slow, uncoordinated circle.

“Sounds like a masochist,” Nancy offers, sounding rather amused. Jonathan doesn’t know what the word means but it makes Steve laugh, and he finds himself smiling despite the fact that he had been in such an awful mood moments ago.

“You jackass, put me down!” Jonathan laughs, gripping the back of

Steve's shirt and squeezing his eyes shut. Steve picks up his pace a little bit and then screeches to a stop, almost toppling over backwards if it wasn't for Nancy rushing up behind him and steadying the both of them. Jonathan looks up and Nancy's face is right before his, her blue eyes sparkling with delight. Jonathan blushes a little as he's set down, his legs are wobbly and he feels a bit lightheaded.

"So, how exactly did you get hit with a rock?" She questions, Jonathan's hand automatically comes up to brush his fingers anxiously against his lips. He thinks about the situation that led up to that moment, and for a moment he's afraid of being called a creep again.

"Well you see, he was in the tree." He explains, pointing up to the tree tops above, Nancy follows the direction and gazes up at the sky. "And Tommy, who you met earlier, decided to test out gravity. Jonny took a rock to the skull and fell about fifteen feet. I thought he was dead for a good minute." Nancy gapes at the both of them, eyes turning to Jonathan.

"Were you hurt bad?" She asks, Jonathan quickly shakes his head in reply. He glances over at Steve, wondering just exactly why he decided to censor out that Jonathan was the creep in this story, spying on a group of kids.

"I had to carry him back to the house," Steve offers, propping his hands on his hips. "And the friendship was born, no going back." He grins at Jonathan, reaching over to ruffle his hair, Jonathan pushing at his hands and fixing his already messy locks.

There's a faint noise coming from over near the house suddenly, they

all turn their heads with a frown. Jonathan squints his eyes and walks a few steps closer, spotting his nana on the front porch.

“That’s nana, lunch time, I guess.” He shrugs, turning his head to look back at Steve.

“Ah jeez, I’m late for clean up.” Steve says, pulling his keys from his pocket as they start back towards the house. “If nana makes cookies, save me a few, will you?” He smiles with a wink, Jonathan nods his head and allows Steve to pull him into a small side hug before the older boy is hurrying ahead towards his car.

“Steve seems like a nice guy,” Nancy offers as they walk towards the house, Jonathan watches the red car pull out from the dirt road and onto the street.

“He is,” He says quietly, fidgeting with his new camera.

“He speaks for you a lot.” She says, not a question, merely an observation. “Doesn’t it bother you?” She then asks, Jonathan finds himself frowning at the mere idea. Of course it didn’t bother him, Steve let him talk when he wanted to talk. Hell, Steve seemed to know when he did or didn’t want to talk, and he filled in the spaces as needed.

“No,” He replies, not expressing any of these thoughts.

“Do you not like me or something?” She questions as they reach the

porch, Jonathan pauses in his reach for the front door handle. He contemplates this for a moment, he had a few reasons to hate Nancy. She was coming in between Jonathan and Steve, and a lot of her friends were the girls that stuck gum in his hair or wrote ‘queer’ on his desks. However, she had never really done nothing to him, so he couldn’t muster more than a little agitation with her presence.

“No,” He opens the door, she follows him in.

“Do you only talk in one word answers?” She questions, sounding annoyed, he looks back at her with a bored expression.

“Sometimes,” He says, just to piss her off, heading into the kitchen. He hears the girl scoff, but he ignores it. All he had to do was ditch Nancy as much as possible and keep Steve far away from her and he’d have a good summer.

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Jonathan jerks at the sound of knocking on his window, glancing up from his box of pictures and spotting a figure on the roof in the dark. He gets to his feet in a hurry, walking over to the window and unlocking it before pulling the pane open. Steve leans in, scrambling into the room, Jonathan’s eyes widen at the sight of the guitar in his hand.

“Here to serenade Nancy?” He jokes, although after he says it, it sort of concerns him. What if Steve and Nancy started dating and Jonathan just became some third wheel?

“The only person I’m here to serenade is you, Jonny boy.” Steve grins teasingly, standing straight up and glancing over at the bed. Jonathan’s heart seizes up a little as the older boy sets his guitar down against the edge of the bed and leans over to look at the pictures. “What uh… Where’d these come from?” Steve asks quietly, Jonathan shuffles awkwardly and then hurries around the bed to start scooping them up.

“It’s just a box of pictures I keep separate from my other ones,” He mutters, freezing up when Steve takes one out of the box and starts looking at it. “Still nosy, huh?” He snaps quietly, Steve doesn’t look angry at being snapped at, just looks over at Jonathan like he was trying to dissect him with his brain.

“Why do you keep them separate?” He places his hand on the rim of the box so Jonathan can’t put the lid on, forcing him to answer.

“Because I dunno, they’re different.” He reaches out for the picture in Steve’s hand, when it’s safely in his hand, he looks at it for a moment. It’s a snapshot of Jonathan, his face turned to the side and his hand reaching out towards the camera with a look of irritation prominent on his face. He remembered it from a day when Will had borrowed his camera for a project, it was one of the ones where he swore he looked just like his father.

“It’s pictures of you,” Steve says softly as he sits down on the mattress, Jonathan scowls down at the picture and has the urge to rip it up. However, he knew he could never rip it up, that was the reason for the box’s existence in the first place.

“Who wants to look at themselves anyway?” Jonathan tosses the picture back into the box and pushes Steve’s hand away to put the lid on. “How did the cleaning go?” He questions, Steve sighs and stands up.

“The usual, lots of griping and threats of military school.” He waves a hand, picking up his guitar. “Come on, I set up down at the lake.” He steps over to the window, slipping one leg out onto the roof. He turns his head when Jonathan steps closer to the window, frowning a little. “Put on a jacket or something, meet me out there by our tree.” He smirks, Jonathan is left standing in front of the window as he listens to Steve scramble down the gutter.

His stomach is doing terrifying twists and flips, he can’t keep the smile off of his face as he grabs his jacket and slips it on. Jonathan turns his head when there’s a knock on his door, scowling when Nancy pops her head in to scan the room.

“I could have been naked,” He snaps, the girl rolls her eyes and opens the door a little more to step inside.

“I only opened it because I heard Steve but I guess that should give me more pause, shouldn’t it?” She simpers, peering over at the open window. “Are you going out?” She asks, he sighs through gritted teeth and shakes his head.

“Go to bed,” He demands quietly, Nancy crosses her arms and leans against the doorframe. Jonathan stomps his foot in irritation and storms forward, pushing at her shoulder. “Get the fuck out of my room!” He hisses, earning a push back from the girl.

“Keep your hands off me, creep.” She snaps, Jonathan clenches his jaw and his hands curl into fists at his sides. They glare each other down for a minute, both of them drawn out of their trance when there’s a light metallic tapping coming from outside and a voice calling out quietly for Jonathan.

The young man turns and heads over to the window, leaning his head out and spotting Steve standing back and trying to look up at the window. When he spots Jonathan, he raises his hands as if to ask why he was taking so long, Jonathan holds up a finger to make him wait and then steps back away from the window to glare at Nancy.

“Go away,” He insists.

“I’m coming with you,” Nancy says, Jonathan scowls and clambers out the window. He hurries to the edge and sinks down to sit, hanging his legs off and trying to get a good grip on the gutter pipe. At the sound of Nancy’s feet shuffling across the roof, he hurriedly places his foot down and lets go of the roof to grab the pipe with one hand. He slips, his feet losing traction, hands wrap around his arm and he glances up to find Nancy leaned back and gripping his wrist.

“Jesus, Jonny.” He glances down at Steve’s voice, the young man steps forward and grabs hold of his legs. “Let go,” He hisses, Nancy releases him and he falls right into Steve’s strong grip. “I think we’re gonna have to start using a ladder before you break your neck.” He sets Jonathan down and then reaches up to help Nancy.

The girl climbs down without a problem, pushing Steve’s hand away when he tries to grab her. She drops to the grass without a stumble, Jonathan watches with growing frustration and agitation as Steve grins at the girl.

“Decided to join us?” Steve asks without any hint of dissatisfaction.

“Can’t sneak out without me,” She smirks, and then they’re stepping across the field over towards the lake.

Steve has a blanket set out, along with a lantern and his guitar. They all take a seat, forming a wonky circle, Jonathan sits back against the tree and crosses hiss arms as he listens to Nancy and Steve talk about how long he’s been playing guitar.

“It’s a recent thing, really.” Steve offers with a serene nod of his head, placing his fingers on the neck and strumming gently. “I only know a few songs, but it’s fun.” He looks over at Jonathan, winking at the younger boy.

“I always wanted to learn guitar,” Nancy says, earning another smile from Steve. Every time they spoke, Jonathan found himself feeling less and less special, because it seemed that Steve would just smile and charm anyone in the near vicinity.

“I’ll teach you, if you want.” He tells her with a nod, holding out the guitar and scooting closer. She takes it into her hands, setting the base down on her lap and slinging an arm around it while clumsily holding the neck. It looks huge compared to her, Jonathan watches Steve shuffle closer and start to direct her hands and posture.

Jonathan brings up his knees to wrap his arms around them, dropping his chin onto his arm and watching with mild envy. If

Jonathan had left without Nancy noticing, he'd be the one talking to Steve, he'd be the one learning to play. It wasn't like he was desperate to learn how to play guitar, but they had spent all day with Nancy and tonight was supposed to just be them.

"Something wrong, Jon?" Jonathan's blood ices over at the words, meeting Nancy's innocent gaze and at the same time seeing his father's dark eyes.

Stop crying, Jon, you're a man!

"Don't call me that," He shakes his head, slowly getting to his feet.

"Jonny, where you going?" Steve questions, his arms still loosely around Nancy.

"Back to the house, I'm going to bed." He turns away and kicks a rock as he starts to walk, calling to them without looking back. "Use your own window to get back inside, I'm locking mine."

"Jonathan!" Steve's footsteps are heavy thuds against the grass as he rushes across the field to catch up with him. "Jonny, stop!" He grabs Jonathan's arm, the younger pulls away angrily. "What is your deal today? You've been acting like a real ass to Nancy." He says, and Jonathan feels his chest go from tight to completely constricted, fire burning through him.

"I've been an ass?!" He demands, shoving Steve. "You've been an ass, she's been an ass!" He snaps, shoving the older boy again, it doesn't

do much but it makes him feel at least a little better. “I waited months to see you, and you spend the entire day chatting up some girl!” His voice raises to a shout, but he doesn’t care, he should have known that all of the good stuff wouldn’t last.

“She’s gonna be here all summer, you can’t just shut her out and act like she’d be okay spending the summer in her fucking room.” Steve argues with him, looking just as angry, Jonathan can feel tears burning in his eyes, but he doesn’t want to admit weakness.

“I should have known,” He shakes his head, stepping back, Steve’s expression twists from anger to mild confusion. “I thought for once I could just have something that goes right, that I could a-actually be… be happy.” He shakes his head again more furiously when Steve’s eyes soften at the cracking in Jonathan's voice, and the older boy reaches for him.

“Jonathan,” He sighs, Jonathan reaches up and wipes at his eye when a tear escapes.

“Leave me alone,” He turns away and starts to run, as fast as he can, tears dripping down his cheeks faster than he can wipe at them. He passes up the house and keeps going, racing through the dark field towards the tree line. He doesn’t want to be here anymore, it’s not worth it, he wants to go home.

He can hear Steve’s voice faintly in the distance, but he doesn’t want the older boy anywhere near him, not when he knows that Jonathan really doesn’t mean a thing to him. His chest burns from how hard he’s pushing himself to run but he doesn’t care, surpassing the end of the field and into the woods. It’s extremely dark out in the trees, but even as he slows down to start navigating through the wooden

pillars, he finds himself mildly disoriented.

Jonathan turns around to find the edge of the trees just to make sure he's not completely lost and trips backwards on something. He thumps down onto the ground with a soft grunt, pulling his knees up to his chest and burying his face into his arms. Steve never liked him, nobody liked him, it was all just a way to waste time until someone better came along.

His dad was right, he was nothing but a screw-up, a lonely little faggot who couldn't make a friend if his life depended on it. Everyone was probably better off without him; Nancy and Steve could have a great summer together and they could get married out of high school and have normal lives. He hates himself, he hates himself so much he can't breathe, can't think. It consumes him, he can only sit and sob against his arms, trembling with the force of his emotions.

"Jonny," Steve sounds out of breath when he stumbles upon Jonathan in the woods. "Jesus Christ, you are terrible at handling problems." He steps closer, dropping down in front of the younger and taking in a deep breath before sighing. "What is this about, huh?" He tugs at Jonathan's arm, but the young man holds firm on his position, sniffling against congested sinuses quietly.

"Go away," His voice is muffled slightly but he figures it's loud enough for Steve to hear.

"This is childish, come here." He forces Jonathan's arms away from his face, slipping his hands under Jonathan's arms and pulling him forward into a hug. Jonathan sighs shakily and wipes at his eyes over Steve's shoulder, balling his fist into the fabric of Steve's shirt as they

sit kneeling on the ground in the dark.

“You hate me,” He whispers, Steve makes an outraged noise and attempts to pull them apart. Jonathan clings to the other tightly, not wanting to face him, but he’s overpowered once more.

“We’re best friends, I do not hate you.” He snaps, Jonathan wipes at his face a little more and ducks his head to glare at the ground. “I won’t apologize for being nice to Nancy, but I am sorry that I might have given her more attention than you today.” Jonathan looks up at him with a small frown.

“Might have?” He grumbles, Steve rolls his eyes.

“I did, I gave her a lot more attention. I’m sorry, I’ll tell her that sometimes you and me need to hang out without her.” He explains, Jonathan nods quietly, feeling guilty about throwing such a fit. “Now look, I’m gonna be honest with you right now.” He grabs Jonathan’s chin, forcing him to look up at the older boy in the dark. “I’m worried about you,” He murmurs, Jonathan smirks a little.

“Aw, did you-“ He starts to tease, but he catches Steve’s serious expression and quiets himself.

“I mean it, little dude. You’ve been here a day and it feels like you’re shutting me out,” He tells the other softly, Jonathan sighs and runs a hand through his sweaty hair, feeling uncomfortable. “It’s not just Nancy, I can tell. Promise you’ll come to me if you start wigging out, okay?” Jonathan grimaces up at him and Steve shakes him by the shoulders. “Promise me, Jonny. I don’t care if it’s just calling me to

come over and sitting in silence for an hour." He says sincerely.

"You'll hate me," Jonathan mutters, Steve shakes him again and then tugs him forward into his arms for another hug.

"I will not hate you, you idiot." He grumbles, squeezing the younger boy tightly.

"I don't want to…. to bother you…" He admits, hanging loosely in Steve's embrace with his chin propped on the boy's shoulder.

"The only thing that bothers me is being shut out," Steve says without hesitation, brushing his hand over the back of Jonathan's head. "Let's go back to the house, I'll spend the night and if you so please, we can talk. We don't have to, but we can, is that all right?" He questions, leaning back once more to meet Jonathan's eyes.

"What if you think I'm crazy?" He asks as he watches the older boy get to his feet, helping Jonathan up and dusting him off a bit.

"Nothing's crazier than taking off in a full sprint past a perfectly good house into the woods in the middle of the night." Steve jokes weakly, taking Jonathan by the hand and starting to lead him from the woods. "There are animals out here, dude, scary stuff. I was worried you'd fall and hit your head or get eaten by coyotes." He squeezes Jonathan's hand in his own and the younger blushes, thankful for the cover of night.

“I’d probably have a higher chance of getting hurt trying to climb the gutter pipe.” He murmurs, Steve chuckles under his breath and pulls him forward so they can walk side by side. Jonathan looks down at their hands and wonders if this is just another weird friendship thing they had, if Steve just really liked being close to him.

He looks up at Steve, the light of the moon offering them better vision now that they were clear of the woods. The young man was staring out at the house, seemingly distracted, Jonathan bites his lip. He thinks about Steve teaching Nancy how to play the guitar, wonders if he’d hold her hand if she was okay with it. Nancy kept insinuating that it seemed like Jonathan and Steve were dating, was that just her perception of their closeness or was Jonathan blind to something right in front of him? He wanted to ask, to question it, but honestly he didn’t have the emotional strength to do so at the moment. Steve was holding his hand and not letting go, he didn’t have the energy to even think about his own emotions right now. He didn’t want to look closely, he didn’t want to ruin this, whatever it was.

“You’re staring,” Steve comments, glancing over at him, Jonathan peers down at their feet in embarrassment. “What did we just talk about, man? Are you freaking out in there?” He pokes Jonathan’s temple, the younger shakes his head quietly.

“Just tired,” He mumbles, reaching up to wipe at his dry eye that was slightly irritated from earlier crying. “Don’t forget your guitar.” He says quietly as they approach the house, Steve makes a hum of a noise and then lets go of Jonathan’s hand.

“Stay here, I don’t want you climbing the gutter and breaking your neck.” He instructs, leaning forward to press a quick kiss to Jonathan’s head before turning and continuing through the weeds

towards the lake. Jonathan reaches up and smooths his hand over his hair where Steve's lips touched, feeling his stomach do that strange twisting thing again it had done earlier.

He waits patiently until Steve returns with the blanket and guitar, Nancy nowhere in sight, Jonathan wonders where she is. He takes the blanket when it's offered to him and they walk over to the porch area. Jonathan launches the blanket up onto the roof, grabbing onto the pipe and starting to inch himself up.

"Where'd Nancy go?" He questions as he reaches the top, leaning over to grab the guitar from Steve and waiting for him to climb up onto the shingles with him.

"She went inside, I think she felt bad for making you upset." He admits, grabbing the guitar and the blanket before they both shuffle over to the window and slip through the pane.

Steve sets his guitar and the blanket on Will's bed, shrugging off his jacket as Jonathan shuts the window. He flips the lock shut and tugs off his own jacket, throwing it aside and kicking off his shoes. Steve follows suit and Jonathan steps around the bed, digging into his dresser for some pajamas. He startles slightly when Steve presses up behind him, turning slightly to look up at the older boy.

"Do you want me to sleep with you or in Will's bed?" He questions, Jonathan frowns, he'd never really asked before they just sort of did it. Asking felt weird, he didn't want to acknowledge that they were doing something most people would consider very strange. But Steve is staring at him expectantly and he knows if he doesn't respond, Steve might just sleep in Will's bed and he doesn't want that.

“With me,” He whispers, Steve nods his head and reaches past Jonathan to grab a pair of sweatpants from the drawer. He strips out of his shirt and jeans, Jonathan doesn’t hesitate to watch him this time, feeling mesmerized at tonight’s events. He was exhausted to say the least, but he knew that he’d still have trouble falling asleep.

“Enjoying the show, Jonny boy?” Steve grins at him as he tugs on the sweatpants, Jonathan ducks his head and grabs his own pajamas out. He faces the wall as he dresses, but he can feel Steve’s eyes on him while he does so. However, when he looks back, Steve is already in the bed. “C’mon, I’ve been waiting months to sleep next to someone again.” He says earnestly, holding out an arm, Jonathan is taken aback by his bluntness.

Did Steve think they were dating?

“You’re making a face,” Steve says quietly, dropping his arm. “Did you change your mind? I can sleep in Will’s bed.” He sits up, Jonathan quickly shakes his head and steps forward. “Do I need to put on a shirt?” He asks, Jonathan shakes his head again. “C’mere then,” He holds his arms out, Jonathan switches off the lamp and climbs up onto the bed.

Steve immediately pulls Jonathan into his arms, the both of them pressed close together in the dark. Jonathan can smell his deodorant, but he still kind of smells like sweat even though they’ve both changed. Steve’s arms are warm around him, and he smiles a little thinking about the days he spent laying in his bed at home wishing he could feel them again.

“I missed you,” He says again, Steve chuckles and squeezes him gently.

“I missed you too, and I mean it.” He ruffles Jonathan’s hair and then his lips are positioned on the top of his head.

“A-Am I supposed to talk?” He asks quietly, Steve hums and pulls the blankets over their lower halves.

“If you want,” He offers, slipping his arm behind Jonathan’s back and rubbing it gently. “Got something to talk about?” He questions, Jonathan thinks about it a second, staring at Steve’s chest in contemplation. He thinks about the kisses, the hand holding, and all of the letters between them.

“No,” He shakes his head, breathing shakily against Steve’s bare chest. “Not yet.” He adds, just to reassure Steve, who nods his head.

“All right, maybe another time.” He moves his hand and tugs on a lock of Jonathan’s hair gently, Jonathan smiles against his chest and sighs quietly. “How about tomorrow we take my bike down to the woods and we hang out, just the two of us?” He suggests, Jonathan nods his head silently.

They’re both quiet then, only the sound of the house creaking around them and their soft breathing. Steve draws his fingers along Jonathan’s back for a few minutes, giving him goosebumps, but eventually he falls still as he starts to doze off. Jonathan keeps his eyes open, staring at Steve’s bare chest in the dark, where there are a few hairs growing. He sighs to himself, feeling physically comfortable

but emotionally exhausted and mentally confused. At least tomorrow he could just be with Steve, no Nancy, just the both of them like old times. He snuggles closer in Steve's embrace and squeezes his eyes shut, Steve shifts slightly and nuzzles his face against Jonathan's hair.

6. The Revelation

Notes for the Chapter:

> (It's been a while, hasn't it??? Sorry about that, but it's hard to churn out 10k a chapter, it really is. This one is just shy of 8k, I hope you won't be disappointed... I've been really off my game, so if it's bad, please be gentle. I'm going to start making the chapters a little shorter like this one, but hopefully it'll allow me to write without such a daunting goal ahead)

Jonathan is jarred awake by the restless motions of his bedmate, cracking open bleary eyes and watching Steve move around in agitation. The older boy eventually sits up, running his fingers through his hair and sighing quietly. Jonathan waits a moment, watching silently and still as the other boy rubs at his face tiredly.

“Can’t sleep?” He murmurs, obviously startling the other by the way he jerks in surprise. Steve’s shadowed silhouette slowly nods before he lays back down, the energy flowing off him exuding a sheepish guilt. “Is something wrong?” He questions, reaching his arm over and laying his hand on Steve’s chest. He’s warm, and his skin is very soft, Jonathan can’t help but trace his fingers over it.

“I’m just thinking, I guess.” He admits quietly, Jonathan snorts under his breath, lips brushing against Steve’s arm.

“About?” He prods, Steve moves his arm and pulls Jonathan closer, the younger moving willingly and pillowing his head on the older boy’s chest.

“A lot of things,” He says vaguely, Jonathan hums softly and grabs a few of Steve’s chest hairs between his fingers, tugging them idly. “Ow, fucker!” Steve hisses as he smacks the younger’s hand away, snickering quietly when Jonathan giggles. They both fall quiet for a second, then Steve seems to find the guts to speak. “I had a dream that you had died, and I was standing over your coffin.” The atmosphere is suddenly much more tense and serious.

“Was it gory?” He finds himself asking without a second thought, trying to imagine such a dream.

“See, that right there is why I’m so freaked out!” Steve says, his voice a loud whisper, Jonathan allows him to shift out from under him. He has a fleeting concern that Steve is going to leave, that he was getting too weird for the older boy, but he merely turns over onto his side to face Jonathan.

“I was just asking,” Jonathan says casually, having the urge to reach out and touch again but not knowing if it was appropriate at the moment. “Did it scare you?” He asks weakly, both afraid of the answer and desperate to know.

“Of course it scared me,” Steve says softly, reaching out and pushing Jonathan until he rolls onto his side facing away from the elder and then grabbing him around the waist to pull him backwards. “I never want to lose you, okay? I’ve thought about it a lot, I’ve thought about how much it would hurt if you were gone.” He presses his mouth to the back of Jonathan’s head, squeezing him tightly.

“But I’m just… I’m nobody, I’m n-not important…” Jonathan objects quietly, his voice trembling just a little at the realization that he was admitting something that he’d never had the balls to discuss with

anyone.

“You are, you’re so important.” Steve’s arms tighten around him, his head shifting down to press a kiss to the back of his neck. “You’re kind and thoughtful, not to mention you have that smart-ass personality I love so much.” He chuckles, Jonathan feels tears burning in his eyes as he grips Steve’s hand. “There were times while you were gone that all I could think about was seeing you again.” Those words pull the first sob from Jonathan’s lips.

Steve’s arms shift up and Jonathan turns over, burying his face in the older boy’s chest and shuddering as he cries against the other. Steve hushes him quietly, kissing his head and combing his hand over Jonathan’s hair. They lay like that a few minutes while Jonathan collects himself, sniffling quietly as the older boy hums some crappy pop song under his breath.

“I think that this isn’t the best time to talk about this, I’m sorry for throwing all this on you.” Steve reaches up under the back of his shirt and rubs gently against Jonathan’s warm skin. “We both need sleep, and in the morning, we can head out to the woods and maybe talk some more. Is… Is that okay?” He questions, Jonathan nods silently, reaching up between them to wipe his eyes.

“Y-Yeah, I’m tired.” He mumbles, Steve kisses his head and shifts them both impossibly closer together.

“I meant it though,” Steve says softly, Jonathan nods again.

“I know,” His voice is almost inaudible, but it must be enough for

Steve to hear because he only sighs and goes quiet.

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Steve doesn't hit the ground running the next morning, in fact, he had spooned Jonathan until the younger woke up. They had breakfast with nana, who seemed to note something was off between the three teens, but wisely said nothing. Eventually, they decided to head out, Nancy stopping at the porch and frowning as Jonathan and Steve stepped down together.

"Are you okay?" Jonathan turns his head, finding the girl looking at him seriously. He had caught her staring a few times over breakfast, but he figured she was angry with him for pitching a fit the night before.

"No, of course, yeah." He grimaces at how fast he answered, it sounded false even to his own ears. Steve's arm wraps around his shoulders, a firm weight that reminds him he has someone that would care if he was gone, it's a weird thought but one that grounds him. Will and his mom would miss him, but they have to, they're his family… Steve thought he was important, Steve liked him around, it felt good.

"I'm sorry for intruding on your summer, I didn't exactly want to come in the first place. My mom is just tired of me being morbid." She apologizes, stepping down the porch steps curtly. Jonathan redirects his eyes to the camera resting against his chest, fidgeting with the strap.

“If anyone understands being morbid, it’s me.” Jonathan says with a nod; the girl smiles a little and chuckles. “It’s fine, it’s just that Steve’s…” He glances over at the young man standing beside him, grinning ear to ear. “Steve’s my best friend… He’s my first real friend, and I’m…” He lets his voice trail off, glancing over at Steve with embarrassment. “Possessive.” He finishes weakly, but Steve and Nancy merely laugh, not mean spiritedly but amused.

“I know what that’s like,” Nancy says sincerely, eyes holding a sobering seriousness that makes Jonathan recall to his fore mind that she had lost something akin to what Jonathan has. He couldn’t imagine it, the thought of losing Steve was almost like the thought of losing his mother or brother… It was…. Well, unimaginable, he supposed. Short, sweet, and to the point.

“I’m just sorry for taking out my anger on you,” He crosses his arms in a nervous gesture, squeezing his practically non-existent bicep muscles and angling his eyes down to the ground. “You didn’t ask to be here.”

“No, I guess I didn’t.” She agrees, then her hand is touching his shoulder gently. “Think we can make the best of it?” She asks, Jonathan looks up at her through his fringe, smiling just a little.

“I think so,” He accepts, watching Steve step between them and take Nancy under his arm.

“Can I talk to you for a second?” He asks the girl, who nods with a small frown. Jonathan watches them step away, but he feels less compromised by the attention Steve showed Nancy. It was just Steve and Jonathan today, best friends, confidants and pals! Nothing could ruin that!

His eyes widen when Nancy leans up on her toes and kisses Steve on the cheek, Steve is smiling goofily as he tromps back over to Jonathan. His arm slings around the younger teen's shoulders, already leading him off to the car. He can't help but glance back at Nancy, who is walking off through the weeds, looking rather happy herself.

"W-What was that?" Jonathan asks as they get into the car, Steve shrugs and smirks.

"I think she likes me," He says, almost smugly, Jonathan's chest tightens as he buckles his seatbelt, he finds himself speechless in the moment he actually has something to say. There's a sticky feeling in his throat, like even if he did try to speak, nothing would come out. "Guys' day, let's have some fun!"

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They drive back to Steve's house, he parks in the empty driveway and slips from the car, fetching his bike. Jonathan climbs out, feeling bashful as Steve slips a leg over the seat and pats the space behind him. They were a little old to share bikes, sixteen and seventeen-year-old boys. This was probably just another one of those weird friend things, but it made all the Nancy stuff disappear. He could spin his camera around to rest on his back, wrap his arms around Steve's waist and lose himself in spending time with his best friend.

They drive out to the woods, the tips of Jonathan's sneakers dragging through the dirt and grass as they cruise down the pathways that were starting to grow over. It wouldn't be long at all until the

pathways disappeared altogether, and Jonathan had a similar feeling about himself and Steve. Sure, he was Steve's best friend, but he could never compete with Nancy. Nancy was a pretty girl, Steve was probably swooning over her, which made Jonathan's stomach churn uncomfortably. He knew what that meant, at least for him, he just couldn't bear to admit it to himself. If he came to terms with it, he'd eventually tell Steve, and then he'd really lose his best friend.

He knew Steve wanted to talk, but Jonathan didn't want to breach the surface of everything that was going on in his stupid head. He slips off the bike and pulls his camera back around, peering around at his surroundings, where moss was covering trees and weeds were slowly rising past his knees. The ground around the swing is blissfully bare, and Steve heads straight for it. Jonathan wonders if he came here and cleared the vines himself or if it was just a coincidence.

Steve sinks down onto the swing, head tilted up as he straightens his legs and bends them casually, swinging himself slowly. Jonathan approaches quietly, holding up his camera and snapping a shot of him with patchy sunlight on his face. He smirks at the sound of the camera shutter, turning his head to rest it against the gnarled rope. His eyes are swirling with a lot of emotions, but there's a faint smile on his face that makes Jonathan's heart seize up and his finger automatically presses the button again.

"You're photogenic," He comments quietly, lowering his camera and frowning down at it.

"So are you," Steve insists, Jonathan shakes his head, Steve gets to his feet and reaches out for the camera. "Gimme," He urges, Jonathan shakes his head again.

“You’re gonna take a picture of me,” He argues, Steve snorts and grabs the strap on Jonathan’s neck, lifting it over his head and putting it over his own. He takes Jonathan’s arm and ushers him towards the swing, the younger sinks down and crosses his arms protectively over his chest, leaning forward and curling into himself.

“Sit up a little,” He can see the camera in the corner of his eye, pointed directly. He awkwardly sits back, slipping his hands under his arms and squeezing tightly. “Relax, grab the rope.” He instructs, Jonathan releases his arms and slowly grasps the rope on either side of him. The shutter whirs, Steve moves and crouches down, taking another picture.

“This is stupid,” He turns his head away, so the young man can’t take any more pictures, Steve sighs quietly and the following quiet is only accompanied by nearby birds.

“You know when you’re little and your mom gives you your first boost of confidence? She calls you handsome and sweet and the most perfect thing she’s ever laid her eyes on.” Steve says after a moment, Jonathan nods his head and drops his elbows onto his thighs.

“Moms have to say that, it’s like a thing.” He mutters, Steve snorts.

“My mom never got the memo.” He says quietly, Jonathan glances up at him with a puzzled expression. “I was never good enough for her, for my dad, all they ever do is tell me what I do wrong. I’m messy, I’m not trying hard enough, I could do better.” He lists, letting go of the camera still on his neck and shoves his hands into the pockets of his jeans.

“My dad did that sometimes,” Jonathan offers, Steve nods his head, turning his head and scanning the field of weeds.

“I grew up desperate for their approval, and that blows. I got a home run on my little league team when I was seven and my coach gave me a hug, when I saw my dad later he said that one of my teammates made two homeruns that game.” He admits, shrugging his shoulders uncomfortably.

“Dickhead,” Jonathan mumbles, Steve snorts and steps a little closer.

“There are a lot of people in this world that will find flaws in everything you do, but after a while you just have to do what you want.” He pokes Jonathan in the cheek, then playfully pushes at his face, Jonathan swats his hand away. “I don’t care who put that little voice in your head that makes you think you’re nobody, whether it be your dad, kids at school, or God him-fucking-self. They’re wrong, you’re wrong, so until you start looking at yourself a little better, I’ll be making the quips about your appearance and importance.” He turns away, gesturing with a grandeur that makes Jonathan snort in amusement.

“So what, you’re supposed to be my conscious?” He asks, dropping his chin on his fist.

“You bet your ass, Jonny-boy.” He spins around and points a finger at the younger teen. “You look handsome today, you know that?” He says with a wag of that finger, Jonathan grins in disbelief.

“I look like I look every day,” He argues quietly, Steve walks closer

and slips behind the swing, pulling it back and letting it go.

“I know.” He says firmly, pushing Jonathan’s back, the younger blushes just a little and chews on his lip. He focuses on the swinging of his feet, the feel of Steve’s hands on his back, the wind in his hair. In no time at all he’s flying, pushing past all the troubling thoughts and the only thing on his mind is Steve’s hands and the simple joy of being on a swing.

He swings back and his back collides with a body, he has to hurriedly scrape his toes against the ground to keep his feet from kicking into the body currently sprawled onto the ground. He slips off the swing and rushes around to crouch next to Steve, who lays on his back with a smirk on his face, Jonathan scoffs at the expression.

“Did I hit your brain out from between your ears?” He teases, Steve grins even brighter and turns his head to look at Jonathan directly.

“No, you swept me off my feet.” He replies easily, Jonathan groans loudly as the older boy starts to howl with laughter. He lands a smack on the young man’s chest and topples forward onto his chest, Steve grunts at the impact but continues to laugh.

He lays there, head resting on his arms and stomach arched over Steve’s, the older boy’s arm comes up to pat his leg. Steve sits up, the movement rolls Jonathan into his lap and he’s caught before he can move away. Steve stares at him, smiling gently, Jonathan can feel the heat in his face as he glances down at his lap. He’s in deep shit, that’s for sure, Jonathan is in deep.

“Jonny?” Steve’s voice is so gentle, a breathy whisper that brushes against his ear.

“Hm?” He doesn’t dare look up, can feel the hand that is curled around his waist, fingers brushing his hip. The world around them seems silent, the birds far away and the wind quieting, just Steve’s breathing and Jonathan’s heart racing.

“Can I kiss you?” Jonathan’s head turns slowly, his nose almost brushing against Steve’s. Their eyes burn as they gaze upon one another, hot brands that rake over every inch of their faces.

“Like… Like a friend?” He can’t help but murmur, Steve’s lips quirk into a small smile and his hand comes up to press fluttering fingertips on his cheek. The older boy’s eyes are pretty, not anything that anyone would deem amazing or breathtaking, but they were brilliant to Jonathan because he knew the person they belonged to. That was the true beauty, not the tan skin or the wavy hair, the kind and gentle person inside.

“No,” He replies simply, Jonathan’s throat feels dry, he breathes out shakily

“O-Oh,” But he doesn’t pull away, Steve doesn’t move, awaiting some form of response. His thumb strokes Jonathan’s jaw and his other hand is gently caressing his back. He’s not scared or anxious, there’s just an overwhelming sense of safety. Steve made him feel like he could do anything sometimes, and right now, he knew just what he wanted ‘anything’ to be.

He scrunches his eyes shut and pushes forward, their lips meet in a messy and uncoordinated press. Steve pulls at his back, Jonathan shifts forward to straddle his hips, resting his hands on the young man's shoulders as the kiss lingers on just a bit too long. When Steve pulls away, he smiles, amused but not in an unfriendly way. Their foreheads are pressed together, the warm summer air starting to make their skin just a little sticky. Steve's hands are uncomfortably hot and yet he can't bear to pull away.

"Is this another self-esteem thing?" Jonathan asks quietly, Steve shakes his head, their breaths mingling in the small space they've created between the two of them.

"This is a 'I've been waiting for months to do that and I couldn't wait any longer' thing," He confesses, cheeks just a little red, Jonathan reaches up without thinking.

His finger traces the damp skin, a laugh bubbles up from his chest, a blinding smile following it. He dives forward and wraps his arms around Steve's shoulders, holding so tight he's bound to be strangling the older teen but he's just so… so… There isn't a word for it that he can find, beyond happy, beyond elated. It's something beyond the human vocabulary, or at least beyond Jonathan's.

Steve smells like sweat and Jonathan's deodorant, which is pretty disgusting considering that meant he used Jonathan's deodorant. But he didn't care, Steve could use Jonathan's toothbrush for all he cared, as long as he never had to let him go. They probably look strange, Steve sitting with his legs sprawled out and Jonathan with his own wrapped around Steve's waist, the both of them embracing like they couldn't live without one another.

I couldn't live without him, Jonathan thinks, rather dramatically. He didn't want to be one of those people, he'd never tell Steve something so heavy, so intense, he would never trap Steve like that. But it was a feeling deep in his gut, like if he ever lost his best friend he knew it would be enough to send him over the edge.

Best friend… Or… Lover?

Lover sounded too risqué, partner was too serious, maybe…

"We're not just weird friends, are we?" He mumbles, propping his chin on Steve's shoulder and finding that even though their chests were starting to get sweaty where they were flush against one another, he was comfortable.

"I was starting to think you'd never realize," Steve replies softly, Jonathan leans back and reaches up to push Steve's messy hair back.

"We'll have to keep it secret," He warns, although it doesn't sound more than a weak mention considering he was terrified that Steve might change his mind.

"People already think we're queer, won't be much of a change." He shrugs, Jonathan takes Steve's face into his hand and squeezes his cheeks.

"You're serious about this? It's not a joke, not an experiment?" He questions, then falls into another train of thought. "Am I the first guy

you've ever been with?" Steve takes Jonathan's wrist and pulls it down between them.

"I've had my fair share of make-outs, not all girls. I've only really dated one person before, but that was Carol and she was too demanding." He rests his hands on Jonathan's side and chest, leaning in and giving Jonathan a soft kiss that leaves his head spinning. It feels more real this time around, filled with affection and care. "Have you had a crush on me all this time?" He asks in return, Jonathan slowly shakes his head.

"N-Not until," He can feel his face starting to heat up, Steve waits patiently for him to continue. "I didn't want you with Nancy, you're mine." He mumbles in embarrassment, Steve barks out a surprised laugh and Jonathan ducks his head, mortified.

"I guess that's okay, as long as you'll be mine." He pokes Jonathan in the chest, then reaches up to tip Jonathan's head up by his chin. "Make me the happiest guy in the world, Jonny." He smirks, Jonathan can feel his blush spreading from his cheeks and onto his ears and down his chest. The idea that just being with Steve could make him so happy, that Jonathan could make him happy… He kind of wanted to cry again, but instead he leaned in and kissed Steve once more.

"So… We're…" He fidgets with Steve's shirt collar, it felt a little damp.

"Boyfriends? Almost boyfriends, I want to take it slow. You're not in a great place, I really shouldn't have kissed you to be honest." He mutters, looking mildly stricken by this thought, Jonathan panics a little.

“I’m fine, I can handle it.” He promises, Steve gives him that look. It’s not pity, it’s concern, worry, even a bit of disbelief. “Trust me, Steve.” He takes the older boy’s hand, squeezing it between his own.

“If it gets to be too much, we can always go back to being best friends.” Steve assures him, and Jonathan feels even more relieved at the thought. If things didn’t work out, he could always have Steve. “I’m gonna take good care of you,” He leans his forehead against Jonathan’s and brings his hand up behind the younger’s head, pulling it to the side and onto his shoulder so they can hug again.

“You always do,” Jonathan promises, Steve hums. “Can you…” His voice trails off, embarrassed and far too hesitant to actually finish his question.

“Go ahead, it’s okay.” Steve tilts his head and kisses Jonathan’s shoulder, hand rubbing the younger’s back soothingly.

“Can you maybe sleep over more often now?” He inquires, biting his lip as they lean apart from each other again. “Not all the time, just sometimes maybe?” He looks down at his hands then back up at Steve, who nods his head.

“Yeah, of course. Nothing helps me sleep better than you being safe and okay in my arms.” He says, Jonathan immediately reaches up a hand to cover his eyes, breathing shakily in a mix of embarrassment and overwhelming shock. Every good thing that Steve said to him felt like a marble added into his stomach, rolling around inside him and making his insides feel all funny. Not exactly good but not exactly bad either, it scared him a little.

Steve's hand brushes against his knuckles, his other one squeezing at Jonathan's arm. He leans forward and hides himself in the older boy's chest, Steve makes a soft noise in an attempt to soothe him and wraps him in an almost too tight embrace. It helps him breathe, grounds him, Jonathan breathes out and it sounds a lot stronger than he feels. Maybe Steve was right, maybe he wasn't ready for something like this.

"Let's go get some burgers for lunch, we'll have our first real date. I'll buy you some ice cream and hold your hand under the table." He offers, Jonathan nods his head but doesn't move from his spot. Steve runs a palm over Jonathan's hair and carefully shifts, pulling Jonathan back to look at him.

"You okay?" He asks, Jonathan nods his head once more and has the urge to dive forward for another hug. He had been in Steve's presence for over a day now and he still felt like every time he looked at the young man, he was seeing him for the first time in years.

"Let's lay in the hammock," He says, Steve's eyebrows rise up slightly, creating a little crease in his forehead that makes Jonathan smile just a little.

"Hammock it is, but you'll have to get your sweaty butt off of me." He jokes, Jonathan snorts and pinches the other teen's side, earning a yelp before he's playfully shoved off Steve's lap. They wade through the weeds over to the hammock, where the shade of the trees is a little heavier, but light still manages to shimmer through.

Jonathan climbs up onto the weathered but still sturdy rope-weaved

hammock, getting comfortable on his back before watching as Steve gets on as well. It's a tight fit, they weren't as small as they were the year before, but Jonathan's head still fits perfectly on Steve's chest and he's at peace when Steve's arm wraps around him.

"Did you mean it?" Jonathan mumbles after a couple minutes of content quiet.

"Mean what?" Steve replies, sounding sleepy, poor guy probably didn't get enough rest the night before. Jonathan thinks back to their conversation about his nightmares, about how Steve wanted him to be more open about his problems. Steve didn't deserve that though, he was already stressed out about Jonathan as it was.

"That… That I make you happy." He closes his eyes, not tightly, just enough to keep himself from seeking out Steve's reaction.

"You make me feel important, Jonny. I spent years just sort of floating through life being a dipshit, and then I meet this cute little guy that turns my life upside down." He says quietly, sounding almost in awe at his own words. "I've never been happier, so I'm gonna annoy the shit out of you, spend the night with you, and make sure you're safe to do the same for you." Jonathan's face starts to heat up again, he fusses with Steve's shirt collar.

"You think I'm cute?" He snickers, Steve guffaws in disbelief and cranes his neck to kiss Jonathan's head.

"The cutest," He promises.

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For a while, it's like he's flying, nothing can touch him and everything is good. His bad thoughts are there, but they're insignificant for just a bit. He can wake up and get excited to see Steve, they hang out with Nancy a lot but when it comes down to the evenings when Steve stays over they like to lounge around in Jonathan's room and talk.

Jonathan doesn't allow himself to dig deep, he doesn't want to unbury things that were currently hibernating. He can breathe, he can smile, he can laugh without too much guilt. Steve is the brightness in his day, the hope, but even the brightest lights can be swallowed in darkness. That much, he has learned by now, having tip-toed so carefully to avoid any thoughts he could. He knows how easily flames can be snuffed out, even the strongest ones.

It doesn't last, and eventually, after a couple of weeks, he crashes. It starts with a feeling in the pit of his chest, just at the bottom of his ribcage. He trudges through it, it's not hard at all, it's a familiar sensation that only worries him. The feeling was closely followed by the emptiness, not numbness, just empty. It wasn't like he couldn't feel, it was like it had all been scooped out of him.

Jonathan is silent all through the day, luckily Steve hadn't visited, had swim practice. He had quit baseball, it seemed like swimming was what he liked best. He had promised that Jonathan could come see a meet sometime, and Jonathan had grinned from ear to ear and felt genuinely happy. He couldn't recall how that felt now, every time he tried to pull up the emotion, he was met with a different sensation he often mentally described as sticky cement. Like all of those

emotions were trapped inside him in a ball of wet cement somewhere and he couldn't access them, pulling on them only frustrated him and made him panic. His attempts at getting out of his shitty headspace always served to make things worse, but he couldn't help it.

After dinner, he locks himself in his room, the cement in his chest starting to bubble and expand. He knew what would happen if it burst, the so-called splatter would be resounding. Going from empty to spilling over, he already felt weak in the knees just trying to prepare himself for what he was on the precipice of. It wouldn't be quiet, and Nancy was just across the hall, he didn't have a shed to cry in like he did at home.

Jonathan casts a glance over at the closet, grabbing his Walkman with shaking hands and then turning to dig through his messy bedside table for a spare flashlight. Tears burn his eyes as he opens the closet door, settling the Walkman and flashlight just inside before turning back to tear his blankets from his bed. Jonathan locks the door, splays out one of the blankets on the floor of the closet and crawls inside. He's safely inside in just a moment, laying down on his side and hugging his arms tightly to his chest.

He pulls in a deep breath, feeling the way it trembles against his tightening throat. Jonathan squeezes his eyes shut, tears dripping awkwardly down his nose and onto his temple from the angle, he lets out a soft sob. He wants to scream, has the urge to make it all stop by doing something dangerous and stupid, the very same something he knew a few people were afraid of him doing. He was afraid of it too, but the empty feeling was gone, and the feeling of drowning was far worse. He grabs the other blanket and shoves his face into it, his next sob is louder but luckily, it's muffled. Jonathan's hands shake as they clench the quilt, his shoulders quiver and his chest jerks in harsh spasms. He throws the blanket over his face, wanting to hide away and disappear.

It doesn't make sense, but he hates himself most in these moments. He hates that he can't be normal, he's angry with himself for being so weak and pathetic. Nancy wasn't like this, nor Steve, not even Will, who was most Jonathan-like person he'd ever met. They weren't broken like him, jagged and torn to shreds, clinging to the pieces that were left. He feels like he'll never be happy again, and that single thought makes his hard but steady sobs dissolve into choppy gasps of air.

He doesn't hear the closet door open, he jerks at the feeling of hands grabbing him under his arms. The blanket falls away from his face, he's blinded by the light of the lamp just outside the closet, but he recognizes the coifed hair and strong hands that were trying so hard to be gentle.

"Jonathan, hey…" He's hauled into Steve's lap, not yanked from the closet or forced to expose his weakness to his grandmother or Nancy. "Look at me, Jonny, it's okay…" He hushes the younger softly, one hand resting on his rabbiting chest and the other rubbing his back. Tears blur his vision, his chest hurts from the pain and the lack of oxygen, Steve looks so worried and this was the last thing he wanted!

He tried so hard to keep it away from the older boy, Jonathan didn't want to taint him with his thoughts that were more like sticky tar than anything else. Steve was so good, far better than Jonathan could ever be. Just being in his presence made Jonathan feel like he was yanking Steve's ankle until he sank underwater with him. Jonathan clutches to Steve's shirt and chokes on his next sob, coughing loudly.

"You're all red, you have to calm down…" Steve murmurs, shifting Jonathan closer to his chest and hooking an arm underneath the

boy's knees to cradle him as if he were a child. "You know that song, that Beach Boys song we like?" He asks, Jonathan reaches up to cover his mouth, he was making the ugliest rasping wheezes. Steve quickly pulls his hand away, squeezing the younger tighter against him. "Beach Boys, Jonny, I like to think it's our song." He admits, Jonathan coughs quietly and the elder pats his back reassuringly.

"O-Ours?" He mumbles, taking a few deeper breaths that still sound like shudders as he exhales.

"Yeah, how's it go?" He rubs Jonathan's arm, squeezes it until Jonathan's aware of the pressure, not painful but grounding.

"I-I…" He shakes his head, at a loss for words, his head was a jumble and Steve must see the panic in his eyes because he presses a kiss to Jonathan's forehead.

"Wouldn't it be nice if we were older," Steve starts to murmur, his voice lilted into an attempt at a tune, close to breaking at the high but quiet pitch he tries for. "Then we wouldn't have to wait so long…" He continues softly, Jonathan swallows against his dry throat and pulls in a sudden quiet gasp, just to get the air he needs into his lungs as fast as possible.

"And wouldn't it be nice to live together, in the kind of world where we belong?" Steve adjusts his position, smiling just a little as Jonathan drops his head against the older boy's shoulder. He places his hand on top of the one on his chest, squeezing it gently and coughing to clear his airways better. "You know it's gonna make it that much better, when we can say goodnight and stay together." The high note near the end makes Steve's quiet voice crack, but he's still smiling, and Jonathan is mesmerized by how someone can make

flaws seem perfect.

Steve presses another kiss against his temple, Jonathan shuts his eyes and for the first time all day, starts to relax. The older boy falls silent, Jonathan isn't too disappointed but he kind of liked the singing, it filled the quiet. He can hear Steve's slow breaths creating a rhythm with his own mildly faster ones, he swallows again and tries to match it.

"You scared me so bad, little dude." Steve eventually mutters, seemingly relieved, Jonathan moves his hand and lets it hang on Steve's shirt collar, likes the security it gives him. "I didn't think a person could get that red," He touches Jonathan's cheek, smoothing his thumb over a drying stream that tears had poured down. He wants to apologize, to tell Steve he shouldn't have to see him like this, but his words are stuck in his throat.

Steve is quiet again for a bit, then he shifts and reaches out to grab the closet door handle. He pulls the door shut, plunging them into darkness that doesn't feel nearly as suffocating as it did with Steve's arms holding him so securely now. Jonathan reaches out and paws around, locates the flashlight and switches it on, just to shed a little light.

"I thought maybe you were feeling better now that we're… you know." Steve says, seemingly disappointed, Jonathan feels the hurt in his chest travel up into his throat, makes it close again.

"It doesn't stop," He rasps, voice strained from his exhaustion and from his constricted airway. "Not now, not ever." He whispers, leaning forward just a bit to bury his face in Steve's neck. He expects a speech, something to dismiss this awful feeling. It was a phase, he

would get over it, he'd find happiness eventually… But it always came back, it didn't feel anything like a phase, and even his happiness seemed like it was watered down even when he wasn't like this.

"I'm sorry, Jonathan." He sounds so sincere, so lost, unsure of what to say or do. Jonathan knows just how he feels, stuck, helpless. "But I'm here, if that makes it better…" He offers quietly, Jonathan nods, it did. He didn't feel as alone, not as heavy with him here. It alleviated some of the darkness, even if most of it was still weighing him down.

"Do… Do you really think of that as our song?" He asks after a moment of hesitation, seeing Steve's responding smile even in the dim light of the flashlight.

"Every time I hear it, I think of us. Just us, somewhere nice, not expensive but good enough. We get two bedrooms; our landlord thinks we're just roommates. But inside, it's our own little paradise, our home." He whispers, Jonathan's eyes widen a little and his heart does a funny and fast thump.

"Just us?" He breathes, Steve nods and finds his hand in the dark, twining their fingers together.

"We work jobs but after a while we take little breaks, and I take you on great road trips, just so you can take pictures. We'll probably meet some assholes along the way, but that's okay, because I'll always be by your side." He promises, and Jonathan feels that thump in his chest twist into something painful.

“I have to leave in August,” He mumbles forlornly, almost to himself.

“I graduate next May, I’ll move down to Hawkins if I have to…” He promises, and the words send not only a spark of warmth through him, but gives him an idea.

“What if… What if I didn’t have to leave?” He asks quietly, Steve frowns in confusion.

“Y-You mean…” He shake his head slowly, Jonathan nods.

“What if I just transfer over here?” He suggests, Steve continues to shake his head, shocked. “I could do it, spend my junior year with you and then finish up here while you get a job. I could work too, and then we could find a place and we could have it.” He lowers his voice to a whisper; Steve sighs and it feels like a balloon has popped.

“Jonny, you can’t just abandon Will and your mom.” He murmurs, rubbing Jonathan’s back soothingly. “I can’t take you away from your family.”

“You don’t want me to move here?” He asks, voice barely audible. He feels a little sick, how could he be such a fool and get his hopes up like that? Nobody could put up with him for that long, Steve would probably change his mind and he’d be all alone.

“Look,” Steve turns him, so they fit together chest to chest and Jonathan’s knees are spread out, so he can straddle the older boy’s

thighs. “You’re upset right now, this is all moving too fast and if I don’t stop you now this could ruin things. I don’t want you resenting me later if you regret this.” He wraps his arms gently around Jonathan’s waist, who stares at him quietly, thinking.

“You must think I’m crazy,” He says softly, dropping his head down onto Steve’s shoulder. He’s warm, Jonathan can still feel the tightness in his chest but at least he’s comfortable for now. Maybe Steve was right, maybe he was just desperate right now, desperate to be happy.

“I think we need to just make this less complicated for now.” Steve slips a hand under his shirt, warm fingers splaying out over his back, caressing gently. “And when the end of the summer comes around, we can discuss this again.” He offers, Jonathan nods his head and wraps his lithe arms around Steve’s upper waist.

“We’re still… together, right?” He whispers, Steve quickly nods.

“Yeah, definitely.” He kisses Jonathan’s jaw, then sighs. “I came over because Nancy called me, she said you were acting weird.” He confesses, Jonathan sits up and rubs at his eyes, which were red and irritated now.

“It happens,” He mumbles, ashamed, Steve reaches up and tucks a few strands of Jonathan’s messy hair behind his ear.

“What did I say about calling me?” He tilts his head, trying to meet Jonathan’s downturned gaze.

“I didn’t want to bother you,” He says, throat tightening for just a moment, he swallows against it and blinks angrily down at his lap.

“Hey,” Steve grabs his face gently, tilting it up so they’re eye to eye. “It bothers me that you’re laying in a closet crying, it bothers me if you’re hurting and I don’t know about it.” His tone is almost scolding, but his eyes are soft and his voice is quiet, and immediately after, he presses a gentle kiss to Jonathan’s lips. “You have to tell me, okay? I’ll come down here and even if I can’t make it all go away, I’ll try my best to help.” He whispers.

“Thank you,” Jonathan nods his head, dropping his forehead down onto Steve’s shoulder tiredly. “The only person that’s ever really seen me like this is my brother,” He confesses, Steve hums in acknowledgement and combs his fingers through Jonathan’s hair.

“We talked the last time he was here, he’s worried about you.” Steve says, Jonathan shifts slightly and curls his hands into the fabric of Steve’s shirt tighter.

“What did he say?” He whispers.

“He said that your mom is afraid you’re gonna do something, and he’s scared too. I gotta tell you, after all this that’s happened so far… I’m more than worried.” He sits Jonathan back, the boy’s face burning with humiliation. “I need you to look me in the eyes, Jonathan, and tell me you aren’t going to do it.” He insists softly, Jonathan exhales slowly and clutches tighter to the older boy’s shirt.

“Do what?” He mumbles, out of the simple desire to play stupid.

“I don’t want you to hurt yourself, can you please look at me?” He touches Jonathan’s chin again, Jonathan looks up at him and feels tears start to well up when he realizes Steve’s eyes are glassy and filling up. “Promise me if it comes to that, you’ll come to me first.” He pleads, Jonathan nods his head, grunting when Steve grabs him suddenly and squishes the younger teen to his chest.

“It’s okay, Steve.” He murmurs, Steve makes a sound akin to a mix of a scoff and a sob.

“I don’t want to lose you, I’ll never forgive myself if you’re gone.” He lets go of Jonathan, albeit hesitantly.

“That sounds like a guilt trip,” Jonathan says, almost jokingly, Steve smirks.

“Well I don’t want to miss out on all the good stuff. I want as much time with you as I can have, and if that means smothering you just a little bit and making sure you’re okay… I’ll do whatever it takes.” He pokes Jonathan in the chest, who quickly pokes him back, they both give a congested and tear-logged laugh.

“I’m tired of crying,” Jonathan mutters after a moment, Steve nods his head.

“Let’s go listen to music and I’ll stay the night.” He promises, Jonathan nods eagerly, and for a moment he doesn’t feel half bad. He’s cried it out, he has his gorgeous and kind boyfriend at his side,

and the rest of the evening will be filled with nothing but cuddling and music.

They crawl out of the dark closet and Jonathan lets out a silent yelp when Steve lifts him up under his arms playfully before hauling the smaller onto the bed. He rolls over onto his back, only to be landed on by the older boy. Steve presses kisses to his face, just having fun, and Jonathan is grinning when Steve reaches his lips. Their mouths slot together gently, Steve humming in content as they kiss.

There's a creak of the door, Jonathan's knee launches up into Steve's stomach and the older teen grunts before collapsing backwards and tumbling off the bed with a startled noise. Jonathan sits up, eyes wide, his grandmother stands at the door in her pajamas.

"Trudy, we were just-" Steve gets up on his feet, dusting himself off as his cheeks redden. The woman holds up a hand, silencing him, Jonathan can only hear his heart thudding loudly in his chest. He had no idea what she'd do, just because his mother was kind and sincere didn't mean her mother wasn't part of a generation of uptight people.

"I don't need details, sweetheart." She says quietly, then glances over at Jonathan. "Don't let anyone else see this, I wouldn't want you boys getting hurt, you hear?" She looks between the two boys, who quickly nod their heads. "Steve, are you spending the night?" She questions.

"Y-Yes, ma'am, if that's all right." He murmurs hesitantly, she bobs her head gently and then reaches up to fix her hair a little bit. She had a few curlers in, along with a bandana tied over the top to keep it neat.

“I’d suggest keeping quiet, because you won’t be sleeping over anymore if you wake me up during the night.” She says, stepping into the room and walking over to the bed. She wraps a gentle hand around the back of Jonathan’s neck and kisses his forehead, then shuffles over and does the same to Steve. “Have a good night, boys.” She waves her hand and her lips quirk up just a bit as she leaves, the door shuts with a quiet creak.

“I think I just pissed myself,” Steve whispers in mild horror. Jonathan laughs, a bark of a noise that is both relieved and exhilarated. She didn’t care, and possibly even more exciting was that she didn’t mind letting them do as they pleased under her roof.

“I wish everyone reacted like that,” Jonathan says quietly, a smirk still on his face.

“Those that matter, don’t mind, Jonny. Those that mind, don’t matter.” Steve says, hopping onto the bed and reclining back onto the pillows.

“Who says that?” Jonathan asks, dropping back next to him.

“I dunno, some old guy probably… Does it matter?” He snorts, Jonathan turns over and wriggles his way on top of the other boy.

“Guess not,” He leans down and kisses Steve, feeling tired but calm for now. He sits up, rubbing his eyes sleepily.

“You okay?” Steve asks, reaching up and planting his hands on Jonathan’s hips.

“Yeah, just tired.” He admits, Steve hums and splays out an arm on Jonathan’s side of the bed, over his pillow.

“Lay down,” Jonathan follows the urging, rolling over and dropping down with his neck propped up on Steve’s arm. Steve turns over onto his side, pressing his chest to Jonathan’s arm. “Did you mean it?” Steve asks thoughtfully, Jonathan turns his head, usually it was him asking that question. “Would you move here if you could? Just for me?” He asks, Jonathan shrugs his shoulders.

“I love my family, my mom and Will… But sometimes, sometimes I need to be away from that place.” He explains, Steve nods his head slowly, then leans over and kisses his temple.

“Whatever you need, Jonny.” Steve agrees quietly, Jonathan turns his eyes to the ceiling. He had a lot to think about, but he still had until August to figure it out.

Notes for the Chapter:

> (Jonathan and Steve's song in this chapter is "Wouldn't It Be Nice" by the Beach Boys, it's been a Stonathan song to me for a while to be honest!)

7. The Decision

Notes for the Chapter:

> (I know it's been forever since I updated, and I hope this chapter doesn't suck.)

“Let me see, let me see!” Steve takes the envelope of pictures from Jonathan’s hands, sinking down onto the floor and settling it in his lap as he strips off his jacket. The younger busies himself with changing out of his clothes and into his pajamas, had been sleepy-eyed since midnight and now it was past one in the morning.

Steve looks through the pictures, finding amusement in the fact that he could tell the difference between his own photos and Jonathan’s. They both had different ideas of subjects, perspectives, muses, and it was amazing to see how they clashed artistically.

“Who’s this handsome guy?” Steve takes a photo and glances over his shoulder, showcasing the photo of Jonathan sitting near the tree they had met and laughing. Jonathan turns his head, only in his underwear, and blushes lightly before smiling.

“Shut up,” He mumbles playfully, wiping at his eyes and climbing onto the mattress. He leans over the edge, resting his chin on Steve’s shoulder and wrapping his arm around the older boy’s neck with a quiet sigh.

“Tired, sweets?” He can practically hear the blush on Jonathan’s cheeks at the term of affection. Jonathan presses a soft kiss to his neck and reaches up to ruffle Steve’s hair. “Watch the hair, loser!” He says with a laugh, turning around and leaping up onto the bed.

“Be quiet, my nana said no noise, remember?” He hisses with a pointed finger, Steve makes a face and nods his head.

“All right, not a peep.” He agrees, then leans down and promptly starts tickling Jonathan.

“Steve, no!” He tries to fend off the older boy’s hands, squirming on the mattress. He turns over onto his stomach, but it just gives Steve the ultimate pin, he grins as Jonathan presses his face into the mattress and writhes under his tickling fingers. “Steve!” He kicks his leg up and it knocks Steve where the sun doesn’t shine, the older boy falling off of the mattress and onto the floor with a grunt.

“Will you shut up in here?” The door swings open, Nancy standing in her pajamas with an impatient glare on her face. Jonathan sits up on the bed, Steve laying on the floor with an innocent smile on his face.

“He was tickling me,” Jonathan says weakly, Steve’s mouth drops open in mock offense.

“Was not!” He lies, Jonathan kicks his leg out at the older boy, who snags hold of his ankle and tugs him into his lap to wrestle him in place.

“Shut up, both of you!” Nancy says, just loud enough for them to hear, they pause in their roughhousing. “Go to bed, it’s past one in the morning!” She points to the bed, Jonathan and Steve meet each other’s eyes and turn sheepish grins back at Nancy.

“Sorry, Nance.” Steve says, pushing Jonathan off his lap and climbing up onto the bed. Jonathan strips off his shirt and leaps over him onto the other side, snickering quietly as Steve gets under the blankets with his clothes still on. “We’ll go to bed, mom!” He says with a salute, Nancy rolls her eyes and Jonathan snorts quietly.

“Idiots,” Nancy grumbles as she shuts the door. Jonathan looks to Steve and grins, who leans forward and puckers his lips in exaggeration in search of a kiss. Jonathan grants it to him, and then Steve is slipping out of the bed and pulling his clothes off.

Jonathan spots the bruise on the young man’s back as he strips down, frowning slightly as he looks at the fresh mark. He saw them sometimes, little injuries, nothing too big, but enough to catch his attention. He knew where they came from, almost always, and he didn’t know what to do about it.

“How’s your mom?” Jonathan asks quietly, watching Steve straighten out as he kicks off his jeans. The young man’s hand comes around to briefly flutter his fingers over his bruise, proving Jonathan’s theory.

“The usual,” He shrugs, turning around and getting into bed, Jonathan frowns a little harder.

“She needs help, Steve.” He murmurs, Steve snorts and turns over onto his side to face Jonathan, smiling wryly.

“That’s funny coming from you,” And wow, that stings, quite a lot

actually. Jonathan had never heard Steve say something so intentionally hurtful before, and in the following silence, he has the gall to look unaffected by what he's just said.

"You're a dick," Jonathan turns over, scowling at the window as he feels pesky tears burning in his eyes. There's quiet for a minute, and then a gentle hand is touching his shoulder, he shakes it off. "Don't, I'm pissed." He snaps quietly, Steve sighs and the light turns off.

He lays there, tense and quiet, mind racing with all sorts of dark thoughts that he both hates and revels in. He deserved to be miserable, he wasn't that great of a person anyway, everyone hated him. It's not like Steve would really care if he went missing, or if he died… Hell, even Will and his mom would eventually get over it, Jonathan was a little nobody.

"Jonathan?" Steve's voice is so quiet, he thinks he imagined it.

"What?" It comes out a lot angrier and more bitter than he intended it to, but oh well.

"I'm sorry," He whispers, shifting again but not touching Jonathan either. "I just don't like to talk about it." He confesses, Jonathan feels his anger starting to dissolve already, he couldn't stay mad at Steve. He especially couldn't hold a grudge when he knew the feeling, had experienced something similar in his own time.

"I ever tell you about my dad?" He questions softly, turning over to face Steve.

“Other than that he put you in a hospital, not really.” Steve replies, Jonathan hums quietly. “I kinda got the picture, but if you wanted to tell me… I’m listening.” He offers, Jonathan smiles just a little, then remembers the subject matter and sighs.

“He… He used to hit me, behind my mom’s back.” He admits hesitantly, chewing on the inside of his cheek for a moment. “It was just rough shoving for a while, I’d do something or say something he didn’t like and he’d just push me.” His mouth twitches just a little into an awkward grimace, but Steve can’t really see his facial expression, so he doesn’t know why he feels so uncomfortable.

“What about Will?” Steve asks quietly, voice a mumble.

“He called Will a fag a good bit, didn’t push him around like he did me. I think it’s because Will never toughened up like I did…” He shrugs, can almost hear Steve’s eyebrows rise up in surprise. Yeah, Jonathan was no tough guy, but he was tougher than Will. “I didn’t cry to my mom at least.” He adds, Steve shifts a little closer.

“He really hurt you bad more than that one time?” The older boy inquires cautiously, Jonathan nods his head.

“Broke my arm when I was eight, I told my mom I fell out of a tree, but he pushed me because I was standing on the siding of the back of his truck.” He explains, Steve’s fingers brush against his side, when Jonathan doesn’t protest he scoots forward and presses their chests closer together. “Then when I was ten he was saying bad stuff about my mom, I told him to shut up.” He laughs quietly at the memory, a little hysterical and partially out of regret.

“I’m sorry.” Steve says quietly, unable to say anything else.

“He threw me around for a bit, beat me with his belt until I bled.” He reaches back behind him, gently touching the edges of scars near his lower back. It was mostly concealed by his pants, but he had a few lash marks, uneven white patches where the belt had torn tender flesh on his ass and thighs as well.

“S’that what that is?” Steve’s hand reaches around and finds one of the marks, the one above his waistline. His fingers stroke over the skin, Jonathan bites his lip and ducks his head. He reaches back gently to brush Steve’s hand away, embarrassed and raw from the exposure. He knew if he got sidetracked he’d never tell Steve about the rest of it.

“And then when I was twelve, he backhanded Will in the face and busted his lip. I don’t think I’d really ever been so angry before.” He confesses gently, eyebrows furrowing as Steve’s hand rests on his waist. “I threw an empty beer bottle at his head, he chased me out into the yard and held me down. I don’t remember a lot of it, he hit me in the head a few times…” He reaches up and brushes his fingers to his temple.

“Where was your mom?” Steve asks, Jonathan hums again.

“At the store…” He’s quiet for a few seconds, thinking back to it. “I just remember Will screaming, he kept screaming for my dad to stop, that he was gonna kill me and I thought he really was…” He shakes his head, mouth trembling with the sudden emotions flooding back to him. “He probably would have if my neighbor hadn’t been driving

by. He jumped out of his car and tackled my dad, beat the shit out of him." He snorts darkly, Steve reaches up and buries his fingers in Jonathan's hair.

"I'm glad you made it, I'm glad you're alive." He kisses Jonathan's nose, who smiles softly.

"Anyways, I woke up two days later in the hospital. Concussion, I had stitches in my face, he actually knocked two of my teeth out… One was a baby tooth but I'm still missing the other." He admits, reaching a finger into his mouth and feeling in the back of the left side of his mouth where the empty space is.

"I'd never hurt you, you know that, right?" Steve says suddenly, Jonathan's eyes widen. "I might mess up and say some stuff when I'm upset, but I'd never hit you." He promises, Jonathan reaches out and pulls him into a firm embrace, pressing his face to Steve's chest.

"I know," He assures, as Steve squeezes him. "Me either." He returns, Steve nods his head against Jonathan's.

"I'm sorry about what I said," He whispers, Jonathan nods. "I love you the way you are, it's just that sometimes I want to take all of your sadness and just throw it away… It makes me angry, angry that someone so sweet and kind suffers so much." He swipes his thumb back and forth over the back of Jonathan's neck, giving him chills.

"You… You love me?" Jonathan asks quietly, Steve tenses up. There's a following silence that is completely still, neither of them moving, barely even breathing.

“You know what?” Steve leans back suddenly, Jonathan frowns. “Yeah, I do. I love you, Jonathan Byers.” He says with certainty, Jonathan can feel a mixture of nervousness and pure adoration pouring together in his chest, he laughs softly in disbelief. They hadn’t been together very long, just a little over a month, and to anyone else it might have been fast moving. But Jonathan had felt it a long time ago, back when Steve wrapped an arm around him and taken his side over Tommy’s at that bench.

“I love you too,” He says, Steve chuckles and then leans down to kiss him. It’s long, slow, passionate, Jonathan can only grab tight to the other boy’s waist as they twine their mouths thoroughly.

“Good talk,” Jonathan murmurs jokingly when they pull apart, Steve snickers and gives him another quick kiss. “Turn over, I wanna cuddle.” He insists, Steve takes a moment to press one more kiss to his forehead before shifting onto his other side.

Jonathan pushes up against his back, wrapping an arm around him and kissing his shoulder. He can feel Steve relaxing slowly as he starts to brush his fingers over the older boy’s stomach, a gentle caress. He can’t stop thinking about it, Steve loves him… It feels like a dream, the best dream ever, he smiles against the mole-dotted skin of Steve’s back.

“G’night, Jonny.” Steve mumbles, already half asleep.

“Night.” He replies softly, closing his eyes and sighing out with content. *I love you.*

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The day is warm enough to be uncomfortable, July just having begun and the real heat starting to set in. Jonathan was having to apply sunscreen a lot more often with the time they had been spending outside, but at least he wasn't the only one. He watches Nancy spread lotion over her face, down her arms, and then turns his head to watch Steve sink further into the lake water without hesitation.

The older boy was dressed in nothing but his swim trunks, a small slather of sunscreen on his own cheeks and shoulders. Even Steve wasn't immune to this oppressive sunlight, not with the midday sun hanging over them and the water magnifying the effects of it. Jonathan stands with the edge of the water inches from his toes, thinking about the last time he'd gotten in.

"Come on, Jonny boy, today's the day you learn how to swim." Steve coaxes, Jonathan scratches at his cheek nervously and avoids looking at Nancy, seeing her head twist around to look at him.

"You don't know how to swim?" Nancy asks as she stands in the shallow end of the water, wearing a t-shirt over her bathing suit as the dark water laps at her porcelain calves.

"Public pools are gross, and Jason Swanson was there a lot, he didn't like me." He confesses, remembering having his swim trunks yanked out from under him the second he got in the pool when he was nine.

"Come on, let's teach you to tread water like a pro." Steve gets closer, his chest and shoulders rising out of the water as he reaches his hand

out. Jonathan takes it and steps into the water, smiling nervously as he follows Steve in.

The water is cool, not cold, but a relief from the warm summer air. Steve takes them deeper into the water, until the surface laps at his neck when he's standing on the bottom. Steve himself has the tops of his shoulders still visible, a good few inches taller than Jonathan unfortunately. He threads his fingers in Jonathan's and smiles softly, Jonathan returns it.

"Let's see if you can float, that's what I got taught first." He lets go of Jonathan's hands and turns him, lifting him up with ease until he's horizontal along the surface of the water. "You know enough to know how to float, right?" He asks, Jonathan makes a grimace of a face and recalls his pitiful floating attempt from last time.

"I guess," He mutters, water lapping at his ears and jaw.

"Just try to keep your face above the water, stay on your back, and don't panic. I'm right here, so if anything happens I'll grab you." He assures, Jonathan nods his head. "Okay, I'm gonna let go of you, try to hold your breath at first, that kind of helps." He waits a second, then slowly releases Jonathan.

He splashes a little, automatically, face dipping under the surface before he comes back up. He tries to hold his breath, body twitching and fidgeting as he tries to maintain the floating position. Jonathan squeezes his eyes shut and tries to concentrate, he could keep his head above water and he could float in water, floating on his back shouldn't be that hard.

For a few minutes, he struggles to maintain the seemingly effortless float that Steve often showed off. His face dips under the surface a few times, his arms keep flailing out to instinctively search for something to grab onto, and his legs occasionally splash and send him under the water again. Eventually, Steve steps closer and he grabs onto the older boy's arm, which steadies him.

"Just try to keep still," Steve doesn't hold him, just lets Jonathan use his arm to keep himself afloat. "Just like this, you're doing it, all you have to do is let go of me." He promises, Jonathan carefully extracts his finger and holds his breath. He doesn't exactly feel steady, but his face doesn't go under, Steve chuckles. "Success!" He cheers.

"Whoo!" Nancy hollers from the shore, Steve hauls Jonathan against him and he watches Nancy slip further into the water.

"Can you teach me to swim for real now?" Jonathan complains, Steve snickers and twirls him around in the water.

"Or I could just carry you around like this." He offers, Jonathan grins and wraps his arms around Steve's shoulders, leaning in to rest his head against one of them.

"Nancy, does this bother you?" He can't help but ask as the girl comes up from the water, pushing hair out of her face.

"No, why would it?" She asks, getting a little closer and treading the water steadily.

“Because we’re sinful little queers,” Steve says with a mocking scandalized tone, which makes both Nancy and Jonathan laugh.

“I mean, you guys are kinda mushy and gross sometimes, but a lot of couples are like that. Plus, I’m the only person you guys do that around, and I remember that you don’t get to do stuff like that all the time.” Nancy explains to them, frowning slightly. “It’s only fair you get to show you love each other, even if it’s disgustingly cute.” She splashes them.

“All I heard was cute, so thank you.” Steve says with a nod, pressing a kiss to Jonathan’s shoulder.

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By the end of the afternoon, Jonathan is swimming with almost ease, and he feels proud of himself just a bit. There’s a little bit of a flail to his style, but he’s not drowning so he’s content with the progress. Steve keeps getting out to grab the swinging rope, and he swears that he can jump farther than Nancy and brags until she gets out and challenges him. Jonathan is unfortunately dubbed the judge, so he has to choose between the wrath of Nancy Wheeler or his boyfriend’s puppy dog eyes.

He, of course, chooses Nancy.

“This game is rigged!” Steve declares with a splash of his hands through the water, his bangs clinging to his forehead and hanging partially in one of his eyes, a frown on his face.

“How the hell did you come to that insane conclusion?” Nancy asks from her place at the edge of the water, her towel around her shoulders.

“It’s being judged by a single, biased, judge… Who, by the way, is probably delusional from the hot sun.” He says with a gesture to Jonathan, who splashes the older boy out of spite. “Hey, what was that for?” He demands playfully.

“You’re talking crazy, thought you might need to cool off.” He quips, Steve flashes him a wicked smile and starts to tiptoe across the flooring of the lake towards him.

“I’ll show you cooling off, c’mere!” He makes a grab for Jonathan, who shouts and scrambles towards the shore.

“Nancy, help!” The younger boy races out, Steve hot on his heels. Nancy steps to the side and Steve grabs him around the waist, lifting him up into the air. “No! Put me down!” Jonathan hollers, unable to keep the grin off his face as he’s spun around.

“Nancy, this screaming inner tube is pretty heavy.” Steve tells the girl with a smirk, who laughs.

“It’s probably full of hot air!” She crows, Steve guffaws and Jonathan smacks him in the ass.

“Well, what do we have here?” Jonathan is quickly set down at the sound of the voice, he gets his feet firmly underneath him and turns his head to watch Billy lean against a tree with Tommy and a few of his other goons behind him. They’re all dressed in swim trunks, adorning towels on their shoulders or in their arms. “We were just coming out to swim, looks like the water’s been contaminated by fags.” He sneers.

“Takes one to know one,” Nancy says, getting to her feet with a scowl.

“What did you say to me, mousy little bitch?” Billy steps closer, Steve grabs Nancy by the arm and pulls her behind him.

“We’re leaving, Billy.” Steve says quietly, holding his hand out protectively. “I won’t fight you.” He mutters seriously, Jonathan bites his lip at the glint in Billy’s eyes.

“What a pity, I love a good fight.” He reaches out a hand and grabs Steve’s wrist, whipping him around into one of the other guys, who grabs hold of him with the help of another.

“Steve!” Jonathan and Nancy exclaim, eyes wide with panic.

“Go, you guys, run.” Steve insists, grunting in pain when his arm is yanked into a painful position.

“You can’t fight so you get help, huh, Tommy?” Jonathan snaps,

hands balling into fists. “You’re nothing but a pussy, a coward, hiding behind these assholes!” He waves a hand, Billy grins.

“I like these two, Tommy.” He props his hands on his hips, observing them with a malicious grin. “Big mouths, lots of things to do with those.” He says dangerously.

“Big probably is probably a strange term for you, huh? What with your small dick and all.” Nancy huffs, Billy turns his eyes to the girl.

“Don’t, Nancy!” Steve begs, Billy struts forward and gets in the girl’s face.

“Tommy, take the fag and do what you want. I get the doll.” He grabs Nancy by the arms and spins her, wrapping his own around her and pinning her arms against her sides. She immediately tries to kick him in the shin, Jonathan steps forward to help.

“Ah ah, c’mere!” Tommy grabs him by the arm and Jonathan turns, he swings hard and Tommy staggers back with the impact of the younger boy’s fist.

“Go fuck yourself, Tommy!” He snarls, the older boy slams into him and he falls hard against the muddy shore, water lapping at his back and ears as he tries to hold his head up above the water line.

“Leave him alone!” Steve shouts, still struggling, receiving a hard punch to the stomach.

Jonathan feels rage bubble up inside him, hearing the taunts of the boys at school, the teasing from his father. It's less of a snap and more of a crash, the sound of Jonathan's buried fury being released like a tsunami. He sends his foot into Tommy's stomach and launches him back, scrambling to his feet and throwing himself down onto the older boy.

"Stupid worthless piece of shit!" He starts punching, vision blurred with water and tears as he hits again and again. "How do you like it!? Who's the queer now?!" He barely even registers the words, can only feel the pure adrenaline of release, of allowing it all to flood out.

He struggles momentarily when he's grabbed, trying to turn and throw another punch to find Nancy and Steve trying to restrain him. Jonathan turns his head and watches Tommy's friends yank the boy off the ground, face bloody, and haul ass. Billy nowhere in sight, Jonathan lets his taut fists lower slowly to his sides. Nancy and Steve each have their hands firmly on his arms, and other than the sound of his labored breaths and pounding heart, all is quiet.

"You guys okay?" Jonathan's voice sounds raspy, his face is wet with tears that he quickly rubs away. His knuckles are already starting to smart, none broken or sprained, but perhaps a few bruises were coming his way. He luckily hadn't broken skin on any of his fingers except one, and it was a small nick.

"Yeah, we're okay." Nancy leans against his back slightly, Jonathan turns his head to look at Steve. He looks worried, as usual, but he cracks a small smile.

“Nice ass-kicking, hoss.” He says gently, Jonathan’s lips stretch into a grin. “First you get big then you get tough, what’s next? You gonna grow a mustache and get a sheriff’s badge?” He jokes, Jonathan shoves at his bare chest with a chuckle and Steve staggers back before tumbling forward into him, embracing him tightly.

Jonathan pulls Nancy under one arm as he hugs Steve with the other, pressing his face into the older boy’s chest with a smirk. He sniffs, then pats Steve’s back and squeezes Nancy, feeling a bit raw. He had really done a number on Tommy, never quite knew what blind rage meant up until that point. He hoped the guy didn’t have any permanent damage, at least, not permanent enough to sue him.

“I love you, little dude.” Steve murmurs in his ear, just audible enough for Jonathan to hear.

“Let’s get home, I’m cold and pissed off.” Nancy says after a moment, breaking the overall strange energy that had enveloped them up until that point.

“Good idea, I’m sure Trudy will make us some delicious sandwiches.” Steve says, wrapping an arm around Jonathan’s shoulders as they turn to start walking.

“Don’t call her that,” Jonathan laughs.

“She won’t let me call her anything else, what am I supposed to do?” Steve demands with a grin, Jonathan shrugs.

“Stop asking her for food?” He offers, Steve sticks his fingers into Jonathan’s ribs, making the younger yelp and try to get away. He’s snagged back into the older boy’s embrace, kissed all over his cheek and jaw obnoxiously.

“I’ve lost my appetite!” Nancy announces, strutting past them with all of their towels and a smirk on her face.

“Get back here with my towel, you harlot!” Steve crows, scrambling to follow her. Nancy laughs and takes off towards the house, Jonathan watches Steve tail her, smiling brightly.

Nothing could ruin this.

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When Steve has to leave for the afternoon, mentioning an ordered family dinner between himself and his parents, Jonathan walks him to the front porch. They stand near the door, talking quietly and occasionally glancing around to make sure nobody is nearby. Steve has Jonathan pressed up against the door, boxed in comfortably despite the sweltering afternoon heat.

There’s sweat beading on both of their faces after just a few minutes of standing outside, but they both can’t help smiling at one another as they talk quietly and stare at each other. Jonathan reaches up and pushes back his damp hair, the both of them still smell like the lake and it permeates his senses along with the scent of their sweat. It shouldn’t be a pleasant odor, but it’s familiar and therefor carries a fond enjoyment along with it.

“You said you had to go but you keep standing here,” Jonathan says quietly, grabbing the hem of Steve’s shirt.

“I know, but you look so pretty.” Steve tells him, reaching up to cup his cheek, Jonathan snorts. “You do, prettiest boy I’ve ever met.” He says quietly.

“You’re such a sweet talker, I hope you don’t sleep with your mouth open because you’ll wake up with an ant colony in your mouth with all that sugar.” Jonathan murmurs, Steve lets out a surprised laugh and leans in to kiss him gently.

“The only one allowed access to this sugar is you, darlin’.” He teases, Jonathan shoves at his chest with a muffled laugh, quieted by Steve’s lips.

“You’re an idiot,” He insists, Steve hums and leans to the side to kiss his cheek.

“Meet me tonight?” He asks, Jonathan smiles and rests his head back against the door.

“The lake?” He questions in return, Steve nods his agreement. “When?”

“Midnight, I won’t get back from dinner until late and I gotta sneak

out and set some things up." He explains, Jonathan arches an intrigued eyebrow at the young man.

"What do you have planned, Steve Harrington?" He demands playfully, Steve presses another gentle kiss to his lips.

"You'll have to meet me at midnight and find out," He urges, Jonathan nods his head and allows Steve to step back. "The lake at midnight," He says with a point of his fingers, slowly backing down the porch steps.

"Lake at midnight," He agrees, pressing his hand to the doorknob and watching the boy walk to his car. "Bye," He mouths after Steve has shut himself in the car, waving to the boy.

Jonathan slips back inside after Steve's red car kicks up the last cloud of dust and turns onto the main road, driving out of sight. He smiles to himself as he heads towards the stairs, wondering what Steve might have planned for tonight.

"Jonathan," He turns his head, his grandmother standing at the kitchen doorway with a rag in both her hands. "Will's on the phone, says he's ready to come visit now that he's home." She smiles, Jonathan grins and follows her back into the kitchen to retrieve the phone.

"House of cakes, cookies, and pies, Jonathan speaking, how may I help you?" He says as he places the phone against his ear, the sound of Will's laughter making him feel just a little lighter.

His grandmother smiles from her place at the counter, currently putting together some delicious looking little tarts. She hadn't been informed of the fight, any of the fights really, but Nancy had wanted to tell her. Jonathan had barely managed to keep her from ratting, he wanted to stay in Riverton. Besides, maybe after the beating he'd given Tommy, the boy would leave them alone. His knuckles still ached from the punches he'd thrown, and the bruises were starting to shadow under his skin.

"I got your last letter, Steve's gonna teach you to swim?" Will asks him excitedly, Jonathan chuckles. The boy had been bugging him to swim for years, or to at least learn. They had gone with Lucas's family two years before for a week to a lake cabin in Indiana, and Jonathan had spent the whole time at the shore while everyone swam.

"He taught me today, I'm not very good but I for sure won't be in danger of drowning." He assures the boy, who gasps over the line.

"Did you have fun? Did Nancy go with you?" He demands, eager for all the details.

"Yeah, she went with us. She's not so bad." He allows, which Will immediately takes advantage of.

"I told you she's cool, you should listen to me more often." He insists, Jonathan rolls his eyes.

"When don't I listen to you?" He asks, leaning his cheek onto his fist

as he watches his grandmother knead dough.

“When I’m right, which is always.” He replies easily, Jonathan lets out a disbelieving scoff.

“You sound like mom, you know that?” He inquires teasingly, the boy replies with a flustered stammer. “Pack your shit and get over here, okay?”

“Hey, language!” His nana scolds from her place at the counter, he grimaces and waves an apologetic hand.

“Oooh, you got in trouble.” Will hisses, Jonathan smirks.

“Don’t make me regret missing you, Will.” He says with a shake of his head, Will snickers.

“You love me,” He says confidently, to which Jonathan nods.

“I do.” He agrees without hesitation.

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The crickets are singing in the quiet night when Jonathan pries his rickety window open. The heat is still there, not as intense without

the presence of the sun in the sky, but still enough to create a mild humidity. He slips his camera over his neck, and then slides out of the window and onto the roof. He makes his way across slowly, over to the gutter, and when he peers down Steve is waiting for him.

“Punctual,” Jonathan says quietly, Steve makes a face like he’s not sure what the younger said but holds his arms up and gestures him down.

Jonathan takes a firm hold on the gutter pipe and swings himself around slowly, using the brick for one foot and the pipe bearings for the other. He makes it down with less trouble the more times he does it, but Steve is always there before he reaches the bottom to haul him down the rest of the way. The older teen takes him by the hand and starts to lead him away from the house and into the field, towards the lake.

“I thought you said to meet at the lake,” Jonathan says quietly, Steve shrugs and flashes him a smirk in the dark.

“I can’t help but love the Rapunzel aspect of it all.” He teases, Jonathan kicks him in the ass gently and the older boy reaches back in an attempt to grab hold of his leg, narrowly missing. “Behave!” He hisses, Jonathan snickers and squeezes the other’s hand in his own gently in silent apology.

As they approach the lake, a faint glow grows brighter from behind the tree Jonathan had fallen from their first meeting. When they circle around, there’s a blue and green plaid blanket strewn out on the ground and a lantern. Steve pulls Jonathan onto the blanket and they both sit down; the older teen reaches and grabs his guitar from the shadows.

“Am I finally getting my guitar lesson?” Jonathan asks with a small smile, Steve tips his head.

“Maybe later, I want to play you something.” He pulls a pick from his pocket, strumming the guitar gently. He looks nervous, Jonathan crosses his legs and settles his hands on his knees, watching intently.

“You learn a new song?” He questions, Steve shushes him with a soft noise.

“I wrote this for you, but remember that I’m not the best soft singer.” He insists, Jonathan feels his heart flutter and his chest tighten. Steve had written him a song, a fucking song, just for Jonathan. “And it’s kinda short but you know, I’m not Bowie so have pity on me.”

“Steve,” He says quietly, the boy pauses and looks at him, fingers anxiously hovering over the strings of his guitar as he adjusts it restlessly. “Sing me the song, please.” He urges softly, the young man nods his head and clears his throat.

The strumming is simple, switching between chords every so often as he starts to warm up. He clears his throat a few times, and ducks his head, cheeks pinkish in the glow of the lantern. He looks handsome, even in the dim light of the cloudy sky and their artificial light. Jonathan couldn’t believe how lucky he was, to have someone like this with him.

“Soft cheeks…” He starts softly, voice gentle and trying not to crack.

“Brown hair… Sunburns and a pretty brown stare.” He glances up at Jonathan, a small smile on his face. “Chapped lips, lake water air… I met the pretty boy I love somewhere…” He inhales and Jonathan can’t help but join him, enraptured in the song.

“Beautiful… So damn beautiful…” He sings a little louder, a glimpse of a smirk passing over his lips. “Beautiful… He’s fuckin’ beautiful.” He chuckles on the last one, Jonathan can feel heat rising to his cheeks. Steve continues to strum for a few seconds, bobbing his head gently.

“He fell from the sky, lovely as a bird…” He croons playfully, Jonathan snorts and rolls his eyes, restlessly fidgeting. “Hit harder than a rock, or so I’ve heard.” Steve grins, the younger presses a hand to his mouth in an attempt to hide how big he’s smiling, tears prick his eyes.

“Kind heart, shy smiles, one day I hope to make him mine.” He goes back to the original strumming, voice lowering to a gentle hum. “Have you met the boy, I love more than air? I’m sure there’s an angel missin’ in heaven somewhere.” He continues the rhythmic picking for a moment, and then stops, biting his lip.

“Steve,” Jonathan mumbles, in awe of the other’s cheesy but extremely charming romantic gesture.

“I know it’s not that great but I only spent like an hour on it so don’t get too mad.” He insists with a small smile, Jonathan grabs the guitar from the older boy and moves it to the side.

He pushes himself forward, climbing into Steve's lap to straddle him. Jonathan wraps his arms around his shoulders, pressing their sticky foreheads together and smiling as Steve brings his arms up around his waist. They move almost simultaneously, bringing their lips together for a slow and passionate kiss.

"Steve Harrington you are the sappiest and most amazing boyfriend anyone could ever ask for." He whispers, Steve giggles quietly as they pull away. "It's a great song." He assures.

"I had a great topic to write about," He turns them with a swift movement, pushing Jonathan down onto the blanket beneath him and leaning down to kiss him again. It's hot and he's sure they'll be eaten up by bugs, but it's also perfect because it's Steve and Jonathan and they're alone together.

"I want to stay," Jonathan murmurs in between kisses, Steve pulls back with a small frown. "It's not final, but I'm gonna talk to my mom and my nana and Will about it when they come to visit tomorrow." He explains quietly, Steve nods his head slowly.

"They're visiting tomorrow?" He asks, Jonathan nods. "Think your nana will tell your mom about us?" He questions, Jonathan frowns.

"I dunno, I don't think my mom would mind though." He says honestly, to which Steve looks unsure.

"She won't tell my parents, right?" He asks, Jonathan shakes his head immediately.

“Neither of them would, nobody’s gonna tell your parents.” He assures, Steve seems to relax at that. Jonathan reaches up and kneads at the tension in his shoulders, another thought occurs to him. “Will me staying here make it more obvious? D-Do you not want me to stay?” He inquires gently, Steve makes a face and then an aborted noise escapes his throat.

There’s quiet for a moment, Steve’s eyebrows scrunched up and his face contorted with conflict. Jonathan’s hands soften on his shoulders as the older boy lowers his eyes away from Jonathan’s and sighs quietly, shaking his head.

“The kids at school already basically know,” He mutters, sitting down on Jonathan’s thighs and leaning back to push his hair back. “I’m over the moon for you, everyone can see that.” He shrugs with a half-hearted chuckle.

“Billy can see it too,” Jonathan says quietly, pulling himself up on his elbows. “Can’t he?”

“He’s got it in for me, and the only reason he didn’t beat your ass this afternoon is because he likes it when things get interesting. He thought you beating up Tommy was funny, if you stay here, he could hurt you.” He explains quietly, Jonathan reaches out and takes Steve’s hand into his own.

“Has he hurt you?”

“I mean we’ve knocked shoulders a couple of times, he’d kill me if we fought.” He shakes his head, Jonathan sighs and slowly sits up, taking Steve’s other hand.

“Guys at my school do shit to me all the time, I’ve been in fights and gotten my ass kicked plenty of times. I’m just as in danger here as there, the only difference is that here at least we’ve got each other’s backs.” He smirks, Steve still seems unconvinced, frowning again.

“What if you hate it here?” He questions, rubbing Jonathan’s hands between his own.

“I hate my school at home, there’s no difference.” He snorts, Steve’s lips quirk up slightly. “We can hang out all the time, and who knows, I might make new friends.” He offers, Steve nods his head.

“Some of the kids are cool,” He allows, Jonathan leans into him. “When’d you get so convincing?” He asks playfully.

“You’re just whipped,” He snickers, Steve laughs so hard his head tilts back.

“I am dick-whipped for Jonathan Byers, totally.” He agrees with a giddy sigh, bringing Jonathan’s hands up to his mouth to kiss them both. “I’d love to come over after school and moan about my teachers.” He says with a quirk of his eyebrow.

“You could do that in a letter.” He offers, Steve shakes his head.

“Not in detail, not every day, it’s not the same.” He says quietly, leaning in to kiss Jonathan on the forehead. “I want to have you every day, right here with me. Lunch and ice cream, bike rides, late nights at the lake.” He gestures out at the still water, Jonathan turns his head to look out at the water.

“You could spend Friday nights with me,” He murmurs, Steve leans forward to kiss at his neck gently. Jonathan wraps his arm around the back of Steve’s neck, sighing quietly and sinking his fingers into the other’s long hair.

“We can spend our birthdays together,” Steve says between sucking marks into Jonathan’s skin. The younger pulls at his jaw until the older teen moves up to kiss him.

“I love you, Jonny.” Steve whispers, Jonathan grins.

“I love you too.”

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After breakfast the next morning, Steve and Jonathan retreat upstairs to Jonathan’s room. His nana hadn’t said anything to them, which was good, she probably knew that it would be better for them to do things in private rather than out somewhere where they could be seen. She just said she was going to head into town and she’d be back later, and Nancy had left for the library.

It hadn't taken long for Jonathan and Steve to collapse together in bed, fiddling with Jonathan's camera and talking quietly about going to school. Steve takes the camera and holds it above their heads, leaning in to kiss Jonathan and snapping a picture.

"I want more pictures of my boyfriend," He says softly, Jonathan smirks and leans his head forward against Steve's, the both of them crinkling up their noses and laughing quietly.

"You're cheesy," He mutters, Steve nods and pulls him closer, kissing his temple and snapping another photo.

"The cheesiest." He agrees, Jonathan shuts his eyes and sighs against the other's chest.

They had stayed up late the night before, and then retreated to Jonathan's room for a few hours of sleep. But now with full stomachs and the morning energy wearing off, they were both slightly lethargic. The boys fall quiet, breathing softly and huddled together in a gentle embrace. Jonathan couldn't imagine himself being anywhere else in that moment, and he was glad that most likely, it wouldn't be ending anytime soon.

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Fingers pull gently on his ear, Jonathan squirms closer to Steve's chest and swats at it. Steve was always doing weird shit, if he wanted to watch Jonathan sleep or pet him, he could. However, pulling on

him and poking him was off limits.

“Jonathan,” He frowns at the hissed whisper, it didn’t sound like Steve. “Jonathan.” A little louder, he cracks his eyes open and turns his head.

Will is crouched next to the bed, a small smile on his face and his backpack still on. His mother is standing in the doorway, an undiscernible expression on her face. Jonathan sits up fast, almost getting snagged by Steve on the way up.

“Steve,” He pushes the older boy hard enough to knock him off the mattress, he lets out a shriek as he tumbles off. “Hey Will,” He pulls the boy into a hug, still looking at his mother, who waves at him with a little smile.

“Hey,” Will greets with a soft laugh, pulling from him to climb on the bed. “Hi Steve!” He leans over the edge, Steve sits up with a grumpy half-asleep face.

“Hi twerp,” He grumbles, then spots Joyce. “Oh! Hey Ms. B…” He chuckles, getting to his feet with a nervous smile.

“Nobody answered the door,” Will says, lounging back into Jonathan’s lap. “So we let ourselves in.” He explains.

“Didn’t mean to disturb,” Joyce says with a small smile, leaning against the doorframe. Jonathan’s brain is starting to short-circuit for

some reason, he wasn't this nervous when his nana found out. He had always been closer to his mother, he didn't want her to hate him. Not to mention, he wanted her to find out in his own time, he wanted to tell her!

"I'm queer," He blurts, Joyce's eyes widen and she lets out a sort of scoffing laugh.

"I'm hoping you were planning on telling me if I hadn't seen this." She gestures between the both of them, stepping into the room. "Come give your mother a hug, I haven't seen you in forever." She opens her arms, he stands up and rushes in to give her a tight embrace.

"I love you, and I was gonna tell you." He says softly, she nods against his shoulder and squeezes him tighter.

"I know, you boys tell me pretty much everything." She says quietly, then hesitates. "Well, almost everything." She releases him, then gestures Steve forward. "Come here, I want to get to know my boy's first love." She insists.

"Mom!" He hisses, Will laughs as Steve awkwardly approaches.

"What? What's the term? Partner? Lover?" She questions, placing her hands on her hips.

"Mo-om." He moans, hiding his face in his hands.

“Boyfriend is good, I think.” Steve offers, the woman nods and pulls Steve into a hug. “Your family loves hugs.” He says as he hesitantly returns the hug.

“We’re a loving family.” Will says with a wave of his hand. “Can we get ice cream?” He questions.

“What do you think about this, little man?” Steve asks with a small frown.

“I think I knew before Jonathan did, he’s kind of…” He twists his finger around near his temple, a gesture for a silent ‘crazy’. Jonathan scoffs and drops a knee on the mattress to punch him in the shoulder gently. “Ow, mom!” He calls, Joyce smacks Jonathan on the shoulder.

“Be nice to your brother.” She scolds playfully.

“Brat,” Jonathan pushes Will down by his forehead.

“Jerk,” Will kicks his leg out against Jonathan’s thigh, to which the older boy launches himself further onto the mattress. He lands on top of Will, pinning the boy down. “Ah! Mom!” He laughs, squirming underneath his brother’s dead weight.

“Kids,” Joyce sighs at Steve, who grins.

“I know,” He agrees, then looks to the two boys wrestling on the bed. “Dog pile!” He leaps on, grabbing Jonathan and trying to pin him down as well. Joyce laughs, watching them all roughhouse with a fond smile on her face.

Notes for the Chapter:

> (Hey guys, I've decided that where this story leaves off is probably where it will stay. I'm so sorry that I don't have the will to end this. I don't think I even remember where it was going, except for the faint memory of Lonnie finding out about the two of them. To be completely honest, this feels more like an ending than anything else.)